

Report on how local communities influenced Basin Plan implementation – Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder's annual report on using local knowledge and solutions to implement the Basin Plan (Schedule 12, Item 6)

Reporting context

The success of the Basin Plan and associated water reforms depends on working closely with communities and stakeholders who can provide the necessary local knowledge and solutions to effectively implement the Plan.

The Basin Plan requires Basin States, the Authority and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder to draw on local knowledge and solutions across a range of Basin Plan activities including long-term watering plans, annual environmental watering priorities and water resource plans.

It also requires that the best available knowledge (including scientific, local and cultural knowledge), evidence and analysis be used where practicable to ensure credibility, transparency and usefulness of monitoring and evaluation findings.

The purpose of this report is to monitor the extent to which local knowledge and solutions have influenced implementation of the Basin Plan during 2014-15. The report is a requirement of Chapter 13 of the Basin Plan and relates to Item 6 of Schedule 12.

Indicators for measuring success

The use of local knowledge to inform Basin Plan implementation is evaluated using the following indicators:

- How engagement influenced Basin Plan implementation (**6.1**)
- Processes used to identify stakeholders and other relevant groups and individuals from local communities and peak bodies (**6.2**)
- How stakeholders and other relevant groups were engaged (**6.3**)

6.1: How engagement influenced Basin Plan implementation

Where possible include:

- *Specific examples of how local knowledge and solutions were used by the reporter; what difference did involving communities make; where did decisions change as a result of community involvement*
- *local knowledge might include knowledge drawn from Traditional Owners and other Indigenous people and groups. When reporting on Aboriginal participation and influence, processes of involvement may be as important as outcomes.*
- *in 2014-15 reporting, we would expect use of local knowledge to feature in development of Water Resource Plans*
- *examples or case studies are not mandatory but may be a useful way to describe how local knowledge and solutions inform implementation of the Basin Plan*

(max. 800 words)

Response

Local communities have assisted the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder in planning and making decisions on Commonwealth environmental water use by providing their local knowledge and experience to:

- identify environmental water needs and the potential to achieve multiple benefits (such as social, cultural and economic benefits);
- identify potential risks, including third-party impacts; and
- monitoring the environmental outcomes resulting from environmental watering.

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder engages with stakeholders across the Murray-Darling Basin through site visits, community forums and state government arrangements. He is supported in these engagement activities by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office, which includes six local engagement officers who live and work in the Basin. Further information on engagement activities is provided in 6.3 below.

Examples of how local knowledge and solutions have been utilised by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder to inform the management of Commonwealth environmental water include:

Indigenous engagement

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Office has ongoing engagement with the Traditional Owners of the Tar-Ru Lands regarding the appropriate delivery of water to cultural landscapes. Preliminary planning is underway to provide environmental water to the Carrs, Capitts and Bunberoo Creeks system and Backwater Lagoon, near Wentworth, for both environmental and cultural outcomes. This planning has been supported by a range of stakeholders, with the Mildura based local engagement officer working in partnership with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Local Land Services Western, DPI Water, Tar-Ru Lands Board of Management, Office of Environment and Heritage, Murray-Darling Wetlands Working Group, Murray Darling Freshwater Research Centre, Moorna Station and SA Water. While this project is still being finalised, it has the potential to provide Indigenous engagement opportunities through watering of the site and monitoring activities, as well as the exchange of cultural and scientific learnings.

Addressing community concerns around fishing and riverbank erosion

In the Goulburn River, the pattern of environmental water release was modified after consultation with local stakeholders including landholders and recreational fishers. This watering action was delivered to benefit riverbank vegetation (ensuring it received water before the hot summer), which was important for fish habitat but also because the local community was concerned about the riverbank erosion that was occurring (bank notching and slumping).

A second spring flow was timed for late November, to take advantage of warmer water temperatures and support the golden perch spawning season. The flow was specifically designed to ensure environmental watering did not coincide with the start of the Murray cod-fishing season on 1 December, mitigating any potential disruption to local angling activities.

These two environmental flows in 2014 supported the largest spawning of golden perch in the region since 2010. Consultation with the community was very important in achieving this successful watering event while also addressing the concerns of the community.

Response

Responding to local knowledge

Local knowledge provided by state government agencies, site managers and landholders is critical to the management of environmental watering events. For example, in 2014, Commonwealth and New South Wales environmental water was delivered to Yanga National Park in the Murrumbidgee, to support a waterbird breeding event. Throughout the event, the timing and duration of environmental water was regularly reviewed and adjusted, based on monitoring and local knowledge. In this case, an additional 10 gigalitres of water was provided to support the bird breeding event, based on information from surveys conducted by NSW Office of Environment and Heritage ecologists and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office's local engagement officer.

This environmental water supported hundreds of egrets, night herons and cormorants to complete their breeding cycles. This included the first breeding event for internationally-recognised great egrets in Yanga National Park since 2011.

Local management of Commonwealth environmental water

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder has entered into a number of arrangements with local agencies and groups to manage the delivery of Commonwealth environmental water.

This includes five-year agreements with both the Nature Foundation South Australia and the South Australian Natural Resource Management Board to water a number of small wetlands throughout the South Australian Murray region. An arrangement has also been entered into with the Mallee Catchment Management Authority to provide Commonwealth environmental water and funding to restore key floodplain wetlands in the Victorian Mallee region.

The benefits of these arrangements is demonstrated in the recent successful translocation of Murray hardyhead, which was facilitated and supported by Commonwealth environmental watering managed by both the South Australian Natural Resource Management Board and the Mallee Catchment Management Authority (see Indicator 10.3, in the Matter 10 report for more detail).

6.2: Processes used to identify stakeholders and other relevant groups and individuals from local communities and peak bodies

Where possible include:

- *process used to identify and analyse stakeholders and other relevant groups*
(max. 800 words)

Response

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder has mutual stakeholders with state government water managers and holders, local catchment managers, scientists, river operators and the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. These partners inform stakeholder identification, community engagement and communication activities undertaken by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder and staff of the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office.

Response

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder has established and maintained a number of avenues (outlined below in Indicator 6.3) through which individuals, local community and non-government organisations and peak bodies can express a direct interest in, or raise issues about, Commonwealth environmental water and its management. In this way, stakeholders are self-identifying. The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder's online presence via its web site and twitter also enables engagement with, and identification of, stakeholders.

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Office tracks stakeholders through the upkeep of a stakeholder database that includes details of those people that the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder and Office staff have met with or talked to via telephone and email. This database also records those people who have sought regular updates about Commonwealth environmental watering activities (subscribers) and those who used the central email address to provide feedback. This database supports mail-outs of relevant news updates and reports.

6.3: How stakeholders and other relevant groups and individuals were engaged

Where possible include:

- *range of audiences engaged*
- *range of opportunities (types of engagement)*
- *relate these to the Basin Plan obligations to have regard to local views (Chapter 8 and 10)*

(max. 800 words)

Response

The Australian Government's investment in environmental water is an important part of Basin Plan implementation. Local delivery of Commonwealth environmental water seeks to achieve Basin-scale benefits by drawing on scientific and community knowledge to inform planning and decision-making.

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (supported by staff of the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office) plans and coordinates the delivery, accounting, monitoring and reporting of Commonwealth environmental water use in collaboration with state government water managers and holders, local catchment managers, scientists, river operators and the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Office is also involved in state government-led local engagement processes such as environmental water advisory groups and customer service committees. These local forums enable the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder to keep abreast of local information whilst accessing a range of people who are experienced in local water and land management issues. This includes community representatives (landholders and Aboriginal community representatives and others) with intimate knowledge of how their rivers, floodplains and wetlands work.

Meanwhile, in recognition that environmental water is a new and/or unfamiliar concept to many people, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder along

Response

with state government environmental water holders and managers, local river operators and waterway managers (such as catchment management authorities and local land services) conducts community forums in key towns throughout the Basin. For example, in 2014 the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder participated in environmental water forums hosted by the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, in Shepparton and the North Central Catchment Management Authority in Cohuna. These 'joint-agency' forums are part of continuing efforts to explain to a broad-cross section of Basin communities why, how and when environmental water is used, in the context of environmental needs, seasonal and operational conditions and water availability.

In addition, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder regularly meets with individuals and representatives of local government, business, landholders, Aboriginal communities and peak bodies, to discuss the planning, management, and monitoring of Commonwealth environmental water. These meetings have occurred at locations throughout the Basin and in Canberra.

This outreach activity is complemented by the work of six local engagement officers who live in communities across the Basin. These officers commenced employment in September–October 2014 and are located in Goondiwindi, Dubbo, Leeton, Deniliquin, Mildura and Berri. Between them, these local engagement officers cover the majority of regions in the Basin where Commonwealth environmental water is held. These officers attend community events, industry forums and state agency community committee meetings and provide a local contact person for stakeholders to become involved in environmental watering decisions. These officers are also assisting to identify opportunities for watering wetlands on private properties in partnership with the local landholders. These include sites across the Murray Mallee and Riverland areas, where environmental water events have been undertaken, or are being planned, including via non-government organisations such as the Nature Foundation South Australia.

These community conversations are supported by a regular flow of information via a range of mechanisms including emails and phone calls, field trips/site visits/workshops, conferences, newsletters, media opportunities and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office's web site.