

Murray Alluvium Water Resource Plan—outcomes of public exhibition

The NSW Government has agreed to develop water resource plans as part of the implementation of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan 2012 (the Basin Plan).

Water resource plans demonstrate how the Basin States (New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory, Queensland and Victoria) coordinate their water management with the federal government's Basin Plan, including how the sustainable diversion limits (SDLs) set out in the plan will be met.

As part of the planning process, the draft Murray Alluvium Water Resource Plan and a new, water sharing plan for the Murray alluvial groundwater sources were publicly exhibited from 11 June 2019 to 20 July 2019.

The public exhibition period provided valuable feedback that helped to develop and inform the changes proposed for the Murray Alluvium Water Resource Plan and water sharing plan. This fact sheet outlines the main changes since public exhibition of the draft plans.

Submissions

We received 34 submissions on the draft Murray Alluvium Water Resource Plan and associated documents. The submissions raised 28 issues for consideration. Submissions that have the author's permission for publication can be viewed on the department's website at <https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/plans-programs/water-resource-plans>. Note that not all authors elected to have their submissions published.

The issues raised in each submission were sorted into three broad categories—plan specific, statewide or out of scope and then aligned with the corresponding themes in the water resource plan.

How issues were considered

The NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment examined the nature of each issue raised or suggestion made in the submission and then considered the:

- scope of water resource plan
- principles outlined in the Basin Plan
- principles set by the NSW Government for water resource plans, and any statutory, technical or administrative constraints.

We considered following questions for each issue or suggestion:

- Is it likely to have an effect on water availability for licence holders, and, if so, how?
- Is it likely to alter how water is distributed to access licences of different categories or within a category, and, if so, how?
- Is it likely to result in a net reduction in planned environmental water?
- Can current statutory mechanisms enable the change or is legislative change required?
- Is it consistent with current policy settings, and, if not, is development of robust alternative, policies feasible within the timeframe to develop the water resource plan?
- Are there additional costs for the NSW Government?

- Will there be costs for NSW licence holders?
- Does it relate to water charges, costs, operational activities or licensing matters outside of the scope of the water resource plan?
- Are existing programs/processes or other departments addressing the issue?
- Is a full investigation of the issues feasible within the timeframe of developing the water resource plan?
- Is it consistent with the Basin Plan requirements?
- Does it set a precedent for other water resource plans?

Changes resulting from public consultation

Based on the considerations outlined above, the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment completed an assessment of all the issues raised in submissions. The outcomes of this assessment resulted in changes being made in the following areas:

- The water sharing plan to remove the mandatory condition sub clause relating to State Significant Developments and Infrastructure under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (EP & A Act). This sub clause was inconsistent with the NSW Aquifer Interference Policy. Department of Planning, Industry and Environment - Water assesses the potential impacts of an aquifer interference activity against the minimal impact considerations set out in the policy as well as any specific rules in a relevant water sharing plan, based on the information provided in the proponent's environmental assessment and provides subsequent advice and proposed conditions of approval to the EP & A Act planning process for each project.
- The water resource plan to **clarify that local water utilities are required to hold water supply work approvals** in addition to water access licences and that local water utilities in this plan area include local government authorities.
- Schedule D (the risk assessment) of the water resource plan to **clarify that local water utilities can apply for additional shares** if they don't have an integrated water cycle management plan, as long as they can demonstrate the share and extraction components of the licence are the minimum required for the proposed use of the water.
- The water sharing plan so that the **long-term average annual extraction limit (LTAEEL) will not be increased by the volume of the aquifer access licence held by the Commonwealth Government for environmental purposes**. Any usage under these licences for environmental purposes will be excluded from the calculation of annual extraction.
- The water sharing plan includes **additional amendment provisions** that allow for:
 - The staged reduction of carryover provisions (to not less than 1 ML per unit share) and the reduction of the maximum water account debit in a water year for aquifer access licences.
 - The setting of different maximum water account debits by management zone.

Note: *The above amendments may be progressed in the future subject to further stakeholder consultation.*

Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) feedback also noted a proposed change to an existing water sharing plan that was not highlighted as a change at the time of public exhibition. The *Water Sharing Plan for the Lower Murray Groundwater Source 2012* allowed for an available water determination of up to 1.5 ML/share to be made for aquifer access licences, with the view to use

this as a strategy to manage high water tables and resulting salinity problems, if required. This provision has not been carried forward into the draft Water Sharing Plan for the Murray Alluvial Groundwater Sources. The maximum usage under these licence since 2012 is only 14% of the available share, despite ongoing dry conditions. Consequently, the effectiveness of using an available water determination above 1 ML/share to manage salinity seemed highly likely to be ineffective and the management strategy was not included. Alternative measures are outlined in the Water Quality Management Plan (Schedule F to the water resource plan). The change is not likely to impact licence holders, given the low level of usage.

Outcomes of preliminary Murray–Darling Basin Authority review

The MDBA assesses the draft water resource plans as part of the plan development. This assessment informs the federal minister’s decision whether to accredit the water resource plan. Once accredited by the minister, the water resource plan is operational.

The formal assessment of the water resource plan occurs once NSW formally submits it to the MDBA. Once submitted to the MDBA the draft plan can be found on the MDBA’s website.

The MDBA has undertaken a preliminary review of the public exhibition version of the water resource plan. This early feedback has been valuable for informing additional changes to the documents, primarily the water resource plan, water quality management plan and risk assessment.

These changes generally related to clarifying and justifying matters to ensure Basin Plan requirements are met. This included providing further detail on the processes and criteria for assessing new bore applications and applications for trades (dealings). These specific provisions for accreditation are included in Schedule I of the water resource plan.

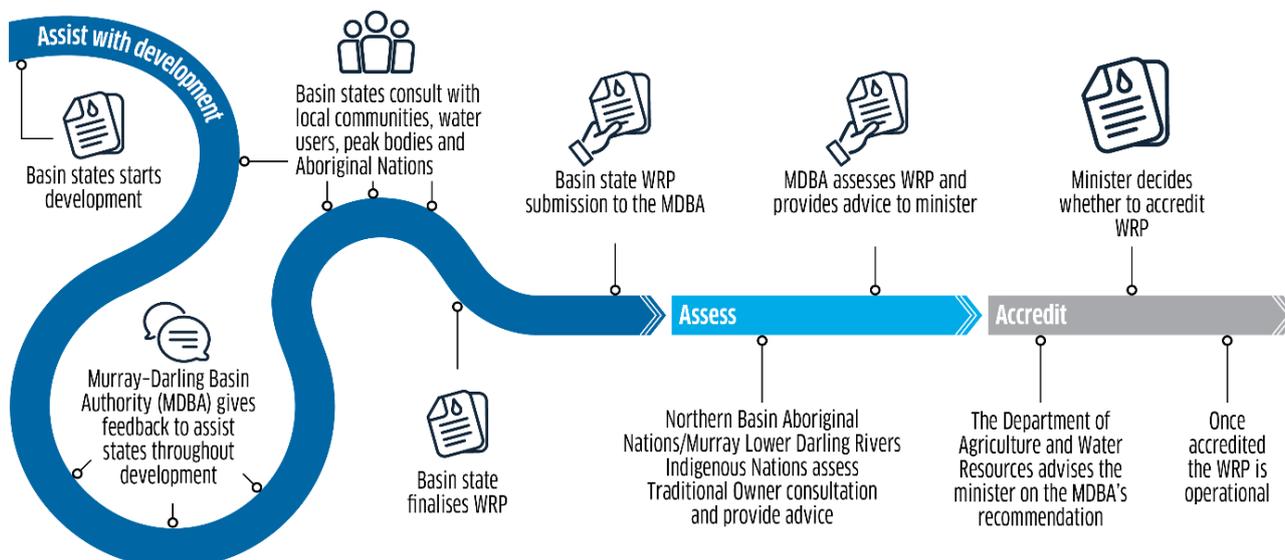


Figure 1. Water Resources Plan accreditation timeline (<https://www.mdba.gov.au/basin-plan-roll-out/water-resource-plans>, accessed 12 June 2020)

More information

A copy of the submitted water resource plan and the schedules and appendices is available on the MDBA website <https://www.mdba.gov.au/basin-plan-roll-out/water-resource-plans>

The draft Murray Alluvium Water Resource Plan that was on public exhibition and supporting fact sheets are available from the department's website <https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/plans-programs/water-resource-plans>

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