



# Northern Basin Review

*There can be no further high impact 'acquisition' of surface water entitlement across the Northern Basin by the Australian Government to meet the water recovery targets set by the Basin Plan.*

## **Key Messages**

- There can be no further high impact “acquisition” of surface water entitlement across the Northern Basin by the Australian Government to meet the water recovery targets set by the Basin Plan.
- The Northern Basin SDLs should be increased (required recovery lowered) by at least 100GLs, from 390 to 290GL LTAE
- If and when over-recovery has occurred, the Commonwealth Government must commit to re-balancing their portfolio accordingly.
- Open recognition by all, that the Plan as written is significantly limited by physical and operational constraints, and there are more effective ways to achieve desired environmental outcomes, than just relying on decreased Sustainable Diversion Limits.
- There must be a change in emphasis to “non-flow” options to better achieve environmental outcomes. “Non-flow” option could include, but are not limited to,
  - Control of invasive pest species eg. Release of Carp Herpes virus, feral pig, fox and feral cat management.
  - Native fish habitat restoration and fish passage works.
  - Riparian zone management and wetland protection.
  - Strategic purchase of land with high value environmental properties.
  - Cold water pollution management.
- Full recognition of the additional 30GL of Long-Term Cap Equivalent recovery that has occurred in the Gwydir and Macquarie Valley, but not recognised due to the incorrect application of cap factors/planning assumptions.
- The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder must have the ability to actively trade in annual allocation (temporary trade), and utilising existing off-stream storages, so as to effectively manage environmental flows to achieve outcomes.
- All possible environmental works and measures should be considered to manage the efficient delivery and use of environmental water.
- If there remains an overwhelming case for additional water entitlement recovery it should only be achieved through ‘zero community impact’ means, such as funded on or off-farm efficiency programs which should be available to all irrigators across the Northern Basin.
- The acquisition of the Condamine Alluvium Groundwater entitlements to meet that groundwater catchment’s SDL should be completed on time and in full.

### **Background**

When the Basin Plan was gazetted in 2012 Section 6.06 allowed the option for a review of some aspects of the plan if requested by the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council. This has resulted in the Northern Basin Review, which will re-examine the Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) for the Northern Catchments and Shared Zone, with emphasis on the scientific justification for the SDL's, and the impact that meeting the SDLs may have on the social and economic life of the northern basin communities.

In carrying-out the review the Authority has commissioned further scientific and social and economic work, and the outcomes of this work are to be considered by the MDBA Board, which will have to make any SDL change recommendations to the Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources.

Any SDL changes agreed to by the Minister would be then subject to extensive rules on consultation and parliamentary approval, as required for amendments to the Basin Plan.

It was originally agreed that the Northern Basin Review would be finalised by mid-2016. It now appears unlikely that this time table will be met.

### **The Issues**

While some scientific review work has been underway for approximately two years, and a significantly lesser amount of social and economic study has also been conducted, there is a growing consensus among the irrigator community that the work is significantly flawed in concept and insufficient to address the concerns regarding the scientific rigour of the Basin Plan, deliverability of the Plan outcomes and of collateral damage caused as a result of water recovery.

At the same time there is also recognition that a degree of certainty must be achieved for Basin communities, and there may well be little benefit in extending the review process in an attempt to improve the quality of its findings.

The Northern Basin irrigator community has taken the view that it would be better to work for a positive review outcome now, rather than extending the review period beyond 2016.

*The National Irrigators' Council (NIC) is the national peak body for irrigated agriculture in Australia.*

*Our objectives are to protect or enhance water as a property right and to promote the importance of irrigated agriculture.*

*Our vision is for a vibrant, sustainable irrigation industry.*

*Our mission is to secure the long term interests of our Members and our industry*

*The Council supports 27 Member organisations covering the Murray Darling Basin states, irrigation regions and the major agricultural commodity groups. We are the voice of irrigators who produce food and fibre for Australia and significant export income.*

*The total gross value of irrigated agricultural production in Australia in 2013-14 was \$14.6. {ABS} Irrigated agriculture produces essential food such as milk, fruit, vegetables, rice, grains, sugar, nuts, meat and other commodities such as cotton and wine.*

*The Council aims to develop policy and projects to ensure the efficiency, viability and sustainability of Australian irrigated agriculture and the security and reliability of water entitlements.*