



National Irrigators' Council

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Northern Basin Review

The Northern Basin includes more than half of the Murray-Darling Basin, and is defined by the catchment area of the Barwon-Darling River and its tributaries upstream of Menindee Lakes

Position Statement

Statement ratified October 2014

National Irrigators' Council Position Statement Northern Basin Review

Introduction

On release of the Basin Plan the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) made a commitment to review the basis for determining the long-term average Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDL) for the Northern Basin.

As part of its commitment, the MDBA outlined its intention to draw on local community input and established the Northern Basin Advisory Committee.

The Northern Basin Review is to be completed by late 2015.

NIC Principles Relevant to this Position Statement

- A healthy environment is paramount
 - Sustainable communities and industries depend on it
- Protect or enhance water property rights
 - Characteristics of water entitlements should not be altered by ownership
- No Negative third party impacts on reliability or availability
 - Potential negative impacts must be compensated or mitigated through negotiation with affected parties
- Irrigators expect Government policy to deliver triple bottom line outcomes
- Irrigators must be fully and effectively engaged in the development of relevant policy

Key Messages

- The Northern Basin, and the individual valleys that comprise it, is genuinely different to the Southern Basin, each having its own characteristics determined by hydrology, community, environment, society and development; a different approach to the Basin Plan is warranted in both Basins.
- The MDBA has failed to develop a case for change to existing diversion limits in the Northern Basin established via State based legislation. On this basis, the NIC rejects the SDLs that have been set for the Northern Basin as being too low, particularly in the absence of a review of the performance of the existing limits and targets imposed by state based legislation.
- Further, the NIC rejects the MDBA's "just add water" approach that underpins the Basin Plan.
- There is in-principle support for the Northern Basin Review and the Northern Basin Advisory Committee provided it operates to a clear Terms of Reference and undertakes a process of genuine engagement with irrigators *in all SDL regions* of the Northern Basin to address issues raised in the development of the Basin Plan.
- The NBAC must have the power to directly influence upward revision of the SDLs in each of the northern SDL regions where it can be demonstrated that environmental targets can be achieved with less water.
- Given the Northern Basin SDL reductions are to meet the environmental watering requirements of assets in the Northern Basin, any change to SDLs as a result of the review should have no flow on effects to the Southern Basin.
- The NIC supports efficiency projects, including both environmental works & measures and irrigation efficiency projects, as the preferred way of recovering water where there is a residual gap to meet SDLs. These projects must be developed in consultation with irrigators in all SDL regions of the Northern Basin to ensure no third party impacts.

Background Information

Chapter 6 of the Murray Darling Basin Plan outlines the Murray Darling Basin Authority's intention to:

conduct further research and investigations by 2015 into aspects of the Basin Plan in the northern Basin, including the basis for the long-term average sustainable diversion limits for surface water and groundwater SDL resource units, and in doing so will draw on local community input that will be sought from relevant local bodies

The [Northern Basin Advisory Committee](#) and the Northern Basin Intergovernmental Working group have been established by the MDBA to provide advice on the development and implementation of a [Northern Basin Work Program](#).

The [Northern Basin Review](#) is considered by the MDBA to comprise the first three components of the Northern Basin Work Program, which are:

1. Environmental science
 - a. Science review to identify knowledge gaps and further research
 - b. Projects to improve knowledge of environmental assets and flow requirements
 - c. Assess ability of water recovery options to achieve environmental outcomes
2. Water recovery modelling
 - a. Scope initial water recovery options
 - b. Model initial water recovery options to identify hydrologic outcomes
 - c. Identify and model refined scenarios to balance outcomes
3. Social and economic assessments
 - a. Identify priority projects to improve knowledge of impacts and benefits
 - b. Complete priority projects
 - c. Assess social and economic impacts and benefits of water recovery options

The NIC submits the following position:

- The Northern Basin Review should, in consultation with northern valley irrigators, review models and assumptions *for all* SDL regions within the Northern Basin to ensure triple bottom line outcomes are achieved. This includes review of:
 - Baseline diversions
 - In-valley environmental water requirements
 - Downstream environmental water requirements
 - Measurement and reporting of environmental water recovered e.g. the conversion (or cap) factors used for the Macquarie and Gwydir
 - Apportionment of any residual shared reduction amount
- The NIC does not support the introduction of, or modelled assumptions based on, 'shepherding' of environmental water. In the absence of such arrangements being available to other licence holders, shepherding represents a fundamental change in the characteristics of water entitlement and poses an unacceptable risk of third party impacts.
- The NBAC must have the power to directly influence upward revision of the SDLs where it can be demonstrated that environmental targets can be achieved with less water.
- Water recovery and SDL adjustment projects, be it through works & measures, on-farm efficiency projects, and adaptive flow management, must be developed in consultation with irrigators in each of the Northern Basin SDL regions to ensure no negative third party impacts. This includes consideration of any proposed works at the Menindee Lakes.
- The NIC rejects the "just add water" approach that underpins the Basin Plan. A fundamental question that must be addressed through the Northern Basin Review is – what else, other than total water volume, would contribute to or constrain environmental outcomes?

- Non-hydrological “works and measures” must be accepted as valid works and measures for SDL adjustment purposes. For example if the target in an SDL region is to increase native fish numbers, and the most appropriate way to do this is to control carp, then the installation of effective carp traps, should lead to an upward adjustment of the SDL.
- While there is in principle support for the SDL adjustment mechanism, there is currently no clarity around how the proposed mechanism will work; NIC therefore is not in a position to endorse the method. The timing of the Northern Basin Review must not exclude appropriate projects from the Northern Basin being considered in this process.
- If feasible and cost-effective water recovery and SDL adjustment projects are developed in consultation with irrigators in the Northern Basin, then apportionment becomes a non-issue.
- If the above point is not accepted, then ‘apportionment’ will need to be re-visited in consultation with irrigators in each of the Northern Basin SDL regions.