

Submission



To: *Planning our Basin future together* –
Victorian Government Prospectus

23 June 2024

Thank you for the opportunity of making this submission in relation to the Victorian Government's "*Planning our Basin future together*" A prospectus to safeguard Victoria's environments and communities in the Murray-Darling Basin (the Prospectus).

The Murray River Group of Councils (MRGC) believes that communities must be at the centre of the remaining implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan and must be properly engaged, heard and responded to for the Plan to have any chance at succeeding.

As the tier of government closest to and most engaged with communities, Local Government is critical to this process.

We are pleased to note that the Prospectus sets out a framework and principles for working with northern Victorian communities on Basin Plan implementation.

The MRGC supports the balanced and careful implementation of the remaining Basin Plan commitments to sustain the long-term viability of our regional economy and the wellbeing of our communities and to deliver the environmental outcomes that will protect and preserve our region's ecosystems.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Stanton".

Cr ROSS STANTON
CHAIR



Mildura Rural City Council



SWAN HILL
Rural City Council



GANNAWARRA
Shire Council



LODDON
SHIRE



Campaspe
Shire Council



moira
SHIRE

Contact

For further information or to discuss this submission in more detail please contact

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Executive Officer: Geoff Turner, gturner@mrhc.com.au, 0419 030 314.

About the Murray River Group of Councils

The Murray River Group of Councils (MRGC) comprises six Local Councils in northern Victoria: Mildura, Swan Hill, Gannawarra, Loddon, Campaspe and Moira Councils. The Group has been working together on shared issues on behalf of our communities since 2006.

Water is the lifeblood of our communities.

Agriculture and food manufacturing drive our northern Victorian economy. Together they account for: a combined economic output in excess of \$8 billion; 43% of all local expenditure; and one in four jobs in our region. Around half of all farm businesses in our region rely on irrigation.

The rivers, floodplains, lakes and wetlands of northern Victoria have enormous environmental value and are fundamental to our regional identity. Our region is home to four Ramsar listed wetlands: Hattah-Kulkyne, Kerang Wetlands, Gunbower and Barmah as well as many other critically important and valued wetlands and riverine ecosystems, many of which are under stress.

Our communities depend on a healthy Murray River system for drinking water and for recreation. Our tourism industry relies in large part on a healthy Murray River system as the single main attraction for the region.

The Murray River Group of Councils region is a great place to live, work, and raise a family. We have skilled job opportunities, strong communities, and a beautiful natural environment. We want to see our region grow, and thrive.

This is why our Councils all support the balanced and careful implementation of the Basin Plan to ensure the best possible environmental, social, economic and cultural outcomes are delivered with the precious water resources we have.

Submission

The Murray River Group of Councils (MRGC) broadly supports the Prospectus and the proposed approach of a strategic process for further water recovery. MRGC sees the community led development of local solutions as the most sustainable means to enable irrigation communities to adapt to a lower water future with confidence in the long term security of water for production.

The MRGC has consistently supported the Basin Plan since it was developed recognising that nationally co-ordinated water policy is necessary to rebalance the allocation of water resources in the Basin.

MRGC acknowledges that there is more work to be done and more water will be recovered from Victorian catchments through voluntary water purchase (buy backs).

MRGC notes that open tender buy backs, where market forces alone determine where water is recovered from, make achieving environmental outcomes relatively more difficult and cause relatively more socio-economic harm to our communities.

MRGC supports a planned and strategic approach to the additional water recovery, informed by evidence and developed with the communities living in the affected catchments.

MRGC notes that, despite significant opposition from within our communities, the passage of the "Restoring Our Rivers" legislation means that open tender water purchases (buy backs) are going to occur in northern Victoria imminently.

MRGC remains staunchly opposed to open tender buy backs. This form of water recovery will have serious negative social impacts, will have considerable negative economic impacts, and importantly, will not restore our region's rivers or our valued floodplain ecosystems.

Local councils, as the level of Government closest to communities and with the most face to face interaction with people of any tier of Government, understands that the social impact has been grossly underestimated by the Federal Government and by most economic models.

Reductions in water delivery and farm gate production, even estimates of numbers of jobs lost, do not capture the harm done to individuals and to the social fabric of towns of the changes that open market buy backs force on irrigation communities.

Furthermore, as the Prospectus correctly highlights, recovering water through open tender buy backs will concentrate environmental water holdings in upstream storages from where it is more difficult to deliver to the ecosystems that need it.



MRGC urges the Victorian Government to continue to prosecute the arguments that open tender buy backs will cause significant harm to our region, and will have economic impacts that radiate out to cities across Australia.

In particular, MRGC would like to see more data and discussion in the Prospectus of the impact of open tender buy backs on food security and on the actual social impacts affecting individuals and communities.

MRGC welcomes the focus in the Prospectus on communities and community led conversations as the proposed approach.

MRGC also supports the proposed approach that conversations about water recovery and the future of irrigation enterprises and districts are held at a catchment scale.

MRGC will work constructively and proactively to assist these conversations with member councils agreeing to identify a key contact within their organisations to act as a conduit between council, state government agencies and the community forums that are established in their LGAs.

MRGC supports the four principles for water recovery contained within the Prospectus and consider that these present a better option for water recovery than open tender water buy backs to achieve the Basin Plan targets.

Principle 1 Demonstrated environmental benefits in and for Victoria

MRGC supports this principle. Our communities and many Victorians, value the unique riverine and wetland ecosystems of northern Victoria. This principle for water recovery is fundamental. MRGC councils and the communities they represent will not accept water entitlement being transferred to environmental water holders in our catchments if that water cannot deliver environmental benefits in our region.

Principle 2 Minimised impact on water availability for towns, industries and agricultural production

MRGC supports this principle and urges the Victorian Government to continue to prosecute the case that the Federal Government has grossly underestimated the economic impact and has all but ignored the social impact of open tender buy backs.

Principle 3 Proactive structural change to support a sustainable future for irrigators and communities

MRGC supports this principle. MRGC urges the Victorian Government to work very closely with local councils and northern Victorian catchment communities to ensure that the development of structural adjustment proposals do not pit communities and LGAs against one another.



Principle 4 Support progress towards Traditional Owner self-determination in water access and management;

MRGC supports this principle. MRGC councils support efforts to work with northern Victorian Traditional Owners and support opportunities for Traditional Owner groups to benefit from water recovery in the region wherever possible.

Conclusion

While MRGC endorses the principles contained in the Prospectus, the Group notes that the approach is challenging. The time required to develop community led water saving and environmentally beneficial projects in Victorian catchments will be significant. Meanwhile, the Federal Government has indicated its intention to commence water purchase in the second half of 2024.

The likelihood of these water purchase programs being run through an open tender EOI process is high.

It is therefore extremely important that the Commonwealth be held to account for the significant negative impacts that such programs will cause. Commonwealth investment must be secured for affected communities and directed into strategic local economic development projects that will create jobs and assist in developing new forms of enduring economic prosperity in northern Victoria.

MRGC notes that water recovery alone, even if managed through the planned approach set out in the Prospectus, will not achieve the long term environmental benefits sought by the Basin Plan and by Victorian communities.

MRGC also therefore supports the completion of the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project works to enable wetlands to properly benefit from additional environmental water and supports the careful progression of the Victorian constraints projects to provide certainty and flexibility to communities and river managers.

MRGC believes that each of these three critical aspects must be done at catchment scale and done with the communities that live in these catchments, and with the involvement of local government.

MRGC would also like to thank DEECA staff for the high level of constructive engagement they have undertaken on the Prospectus. I and my colleague Mayors are always happy to meet to expand on, discuss or clarify any of the issues contained within this submission. Please contact Executive Officer Geoff Turner at gturner@mrgc.com.au or 0419 030 314