National Irrigators' Council
Food · Fibre · Future

2025 Basin Plan Evaluation

Briefing Note to Members

24 July 2025

Key issues:

1. Overall positive environmental outcomes from the Basin Plan, despite some poor findings (native fish);
2. Strong points for the need for complementary measures;
3. Problematic socio-economic impact assessment, with changes not attributed to water reforms (e.g., external factors), or downplaying the significance of the impact due to the method.
4. There are 32 documents published, some many hundreds of pages long – we continue to review in detail.

Overview: The 2025 Basin Plan Evaluation and Sustainable Rivers Audit (published 24 July, here), presents a strong case to move beyond 'just adding water'. The findings for environmental outcomes are generally positive in terms of flows and longitudinal connectivity (no surprise, the water-based outcomes), but outcomes are less positive, and even poor (native fish) for non-water-based outcomes (again, no surprise).

There are some really helpful quotes in the reports (examples below) that point to complementary measures, and the need for more time for the environment to respond, consistent with our messaging. These will be very helpful as we move towards the Basin Plan Review.

In terms of socio-economic impacts, it is somewhat unclear and confusing. What is pleasing, is that the MDBA did acknowledge our concern (re our recent media release) about Basin-scale assessments smoothing over local community and industry level impacts, in saying "these Basin-scale trends may mask divergent experiences at the local level'. There is also some industry-level data. However, we still have significant concerns with the socio-economic assessment. Data is presented around agricultural production and GVIAP continuing to grow, despite the Basin Plan. Most concerning, the argument is presented that "most of the changes in economic conditions in the Basin are due to factors other than water recovery" and "Water reforms have had little to no discernible impact on community condition, wellbeing or cohesion. Even in highly irrigation-dependent

communities, the contribution of the reforms was not measurable relative to other factors affecting social conditions".

What we know of the findings from out of the Evaluation Overview Report:

Key Considerations:

- Third Evaluation report, and the most comprehensive consideration of multiple lines of evidence of the Basin Plan so far.
- There are positives; water is helping the environment, but there are challenges to achieving all environmental outcomes (these mostly refer to constraints management and complementary measures), and some communities and industries have been impacted.
- Focused towards the five areas (aligned with the MDBA Insights themes);
    - We are better off with the Basin Plan but not all environmental outcomes are visible at the Basin-scale.
    - Considering the northern basin approach – without much detail on what this looks like.
    - Other factors are hindering environmental outcomes like:
        - Constraints;
        - Fish passage;
        - Pest control etc.
    - First nations engagement has improved and more should be done.
    - Regulatory re-design and inflexibility.
- We've noted some messaging around connectivity but this seems to be confusing floodplain connectivity (i.e. constraints management) and in-river connectivity.
- Further review of the GVIAP calculations and industry impacts are required.

Quotes:

- "Most of the original targets for water recovery have been met"[1]
- "Water for the environment is essential, but on its own is likely not sufficient. Factors such as water quality, riparian and floodplain management, pest control, instream habitat, river operations, constraints and works, and environmental water portfolio management are also crucial to achieve environmental outcomes."[2]
- "When the Basin Plan commenced it was assumed that water for the environment to key sites would be sufficient to maintain ecological health across the Basin. We have learnt it is more complex and challenging than this…"[3]
- "…deliveries of water for the environment alone are not sufficient. Other measures, such as water quality management, riparian and floodplain management, pest control, instream habitat, river operations, constraints and

[1] P 32
[2] P 4.
[3] P 4.

works, and environmental water portfolio management are crucial to the achievement of long-term environmental outcomes."[4]

- "The management of flow regimes, particularly the timing and patterns of flow, is vital to achieving outcomes for native fish. However, flow management is only one component of the suite of integrated management activities needed to build fish population resilience. Complementary management actions such as introduced species control, re-establishment of threatened and non-threatened species, improved fish passage solutions, and habitat protection and restoration are also important for improving fish outcomes across the Basin."
- "… It should be noted that a considerable time lag is expected between short term positive outcomes from water for the environment and full observable benefits to fish populations"[5]
- "The cost of recovering water, whether through purchases or infrastructure projects, is increasing, and previous investments in water efficiency have most likely already leveraged the most cost-effective methods. Moving forward, a considered approach will be required to minimise the negative impacts of water recovery while maximising environmental benefits and ensuring value for money."[6]

What we know of the Sustainable Rivers Audit Overview Report:

Key Considerations:

- The SRA does not aim to measure the impact of policy changes, rather presents an overview of conditions

Key Quotes from the Report:

- Many aspects of the Basin's environmental health have improved since the Millennium drought.
- Under the Basin Plan, irrigation use has been reduced by about 20%, and over 2,100 gigalitres of water has been recovered and allocated for environmental outcomes.
- Over the past 5 years, flows down the Basin's rivers have been mostly good, but getting water onto the floodplains remains difficult.
    - Longitudinal connectivity was rated as 'good' or 'very good' for 76% of assessed valleys. This means those valleys met their 'cease-to-flow' and 'baseflow' targets more than 50% of the time during the past 5 years (2018 to 2023).

[4] P 42.
[5] P 48.
[6] Page 5

- Salinity management in the southern Basin has improved greatly over the past 50 years.
- Native fish populations are in poor condition and introduced species are a significant issue.
- Waterbird numbers have responded well to recent wet years as wetlands fill and thrive.
- The Basin's economy continues to grow and service industries are expanding in regional areas.
    - The agricultural economy has increased in line with the rest of regional Australia. At the same time, the number of people working in agriculture has decreased over the past 20 years. This is in line with trends in the rest of regional Australia and is a result of changes such as increased use of farm mechanisation, improved on-farm technologies, and fewer family owned, small-scale farms. Dryland agriculture makes a larger contribution to total business turnover and employs more people than irrigated agriculture does.

Valley	Longitudinal connectivity	Freshes and bankfull flows	Low floodplain connectivity	High floodplain connectivity	Floodplain tree stand condition	Fish species expectedness	Fish nativeness	Fish recruitment
Border Rivers	**Very good (Stable)**	Good (Variable)	Fair (Increasing)	Good (Increasing)	Good (Stable)	Good (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)
Castlereagh	NA* (NA)*	**Very good (Variable)**	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	**Very Poor (Variable)**
Condamine	Fair (Stable)	Good (Variable)	Poor (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Stable)	Good (Variable)	Poor (Decreasing)
Darling	Good (Variable)	Good (Variable)	Poor (Increasing)	Fair (Decreasing)	Good (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Stable)	Fair (Stable)
Gwydir	**Very good (Stable)**	**Very good (Stable)**	Poor (Variable)	Fair (Increasing)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Stable)	Fair (Increasing)	Fair (Decreasing)
Macquarie	**Very good (Stable)**	**Very good (Variable)**	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Decreasing)	Good (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Increasing)	**Very Poor (Variable)**
Namoi	**Very good (Stable)**	Good (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Poor (Variable)	Fair (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	Poor (Stable)
Paroo	NA* (NA)*	NA* (NA)*	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Decreasing)	Good (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Poor (Stable)
Warrego	**Very good (Stable)**	**Very good (Variable)**	Poor (Variable)	Fair (Decreasing)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Stable)	Fair (Decreasing)	Poor (Stable)
Avoca	NA* (NA)*	NA* (NA)*	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Increasing)	Fair (Decreasing)	Poor (Stable)	Poor (Variable)	**Very Poor (Decreasing)**
Broken	Poor (Variable)	Good (Stable)	Good (Increasing)	Fair (Increasing)	Fair (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	**Very Poor (Stable)**
Campaspe	**Very good (Variable)**	**Very good (Variable)**	Good (Increasing)	Good (Increasing)	Fair (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Poor (Variable)	**Very Poor (Variable)**
Central Murray	Good (Variable)	**Very good (Variable)**	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	Poor (Variable)
Goulburn	Good (Variable)	**Very good (Stable)**	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Decreasing)	Good (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Poor (Variable)	**Very Poor (Decreasing)**
Kiewa	NA* (NA)*	NA* (NA)*	Good (Variable)	NA* (NA)*	**Very good (Variable)**	Poor (Decreasing)	Poor (Increasing)	**Very Poor (Increasing)**
Lachlan	**Very good (Stable)**	**Very good (Variable)**	Fair (Increasing)	Fair (Increasing)	Fair (Decreasing)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	**Very Poor (Increasing)**
Loddon	Good (Variable)	**Very good (Variable)**	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Increasing)	Poor (Decreasing)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	**Very Poor (Stable)**
Lower Murray	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Variable)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Stable)	Poor (Increasing)
Mitta Mitta	NA* (NA)*	NA* (NA)*	Good (Variable)	NA* (NA)*	**Very good (Variable)**	Poor (Stable)	Poor (Variable)	**Very Poor (Stable)**
Murrumbidgee	**Very good (Stable)**	Good (Variable)	Good (Increasing)	Good (Increasing)	Poor (Decreasing)	Poor (Stable)	Poor (Variable)	**Very Poor (Variable)**
Ovens	**Very good (Variable)**	**Very good (Variable)**	Good (Decreasing)	NA* (NA)*	Good (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Increasing)
Upper Murray	NA* (NA)*	NA* (NA)*	Good (Variable)	NA* (NA)*	Good (Stable)	Poor (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	**Very Poor (Increasing)**
Wimmera	NA* (NA)*	NA* (NA)*	Fair (Variable)	Fair (Increasing)	**Very good (Variable)**	Fair (Stable)	Fair (Variable)	**Very Poor (Variable)**