

# With less than a year to go, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan is in a dreadful mess. Five steps are needed to fix it

July 18 2023, by Jamie Pittock

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The Murray Darling Basin Plan is an historic deal between state and federal governments to save Australia's most important river system. The A\$13 billion plan, inked over a decade ago, was supposed to rein in the water extracted by farmers and communities, and make sure the

environment got the water it needed.

But now, less than a year out from the plan's deadline, it's in a dreadful mess. Projects have not been delivered. Governments cannot agree on who gets the [water](#), or how. All the while, [water](#) in the Murray-Darling Basin will become scarcer as climate change worsens.

The Albanese [government](#) was elected on a promise to [uphold](#) the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. But earlier this month, Environment and Water Minister Tanya Plibersek [conceded](#) the plan is "too far behind" and needs a "course correction."

I have studied and promoted sustainability measures in the Murray-Darling Basin for 35 years. Here, I outline the five steps needed now to ensure the health of the river system and the people who depend on it.

## **A refresher: What is the Murray-Darling Basin Plan?**

The Murray-Darling Basin covers [about a seventh](#) of the Australian land mass: most of New South Wales, parts of Queensland, South Australia and Victoria, and all of the Australian Capital Territory. It includes the Murray River and Darling River/Baarka and their tributaries.

These lands and waters are the traditional lands of [more than 40 Indigenous nations](#). Around [5% of the basin](#) consists of floodplain forests, lakes, rivers and other wetland habitats. Vast amounts of water are extracted from the rivers to supply around [three million Australians](#), including irrigating farms.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan [became law](#) in 2012, under the Labor government. It is due to be fully implemented and audited by the end of June 2024.

The plan limits the amount of water extracted from the [basin](#). It aims to both improve the condition of freshwater ecosystems and maintain the social and economic benefits of irrigated agriculture.

Under the plan, [3,200 billion liters a year](#) would be returned to rivers—about 14% of [total surface water](#) in the basin.

The water was largely to be recovered by buying back water entitlements from farmers. Some [450 billion liters](#) would be retrieved through water efficiency projects.

The plan has twice been amended to reduce the amount of water taken from farmers. The first change, made on [questionable grounds](#), reduced the water recovery target by 70 billion liters a year. The second reduced it by 605 billion liters, with the water to instead be recovered through [36 water-saving offset projects](#).

Further, the Victorian and NSW governments committed to reaching agreements with farmers to enable water for the environment to safely spill out of river channels and across privately owned floodplains, to replenish more wetlands.

## **So how's the plan going?**

Things are not going well. As of November last year, the offset projects were likely to deliver between [290 and 415 billion liters](#) of the 605 billion liters required. And [very little water](#) is getting to floodplains.

And of the 450 billion liters to be retrieved through water-efficiency projects, only 26 billion liters has been [recovered](#).

It means of the 3,200 billion liters of water a year to be returned to the environment, only [2,100 billion liters](#) was being achieved as of March

this year—plus the small amount of projected water from offset projects, if it's delivered.

At a meeting in February this year, the nation's water ministers [failed to agree](#) on how to meet the plan's deadline.

As governments quibble, the rivers and floodplains of the Murray-Darling suffer. In the past decade, millions of fish have perished in mass die-offs. [Toxic algae](#) has bloomed, [wildlife](#) and [waterbirds](#) have declined in numbers and [wetlands](#) have dried up. These are all signs that too much water is still being taken from the system.

So how do we get the basin plan back on track? Below, I identify the top five priorities.

## **1. NSW must get its act together on water plans**

Integral to implementing the broader basin plan are 33 "[water resource plans](#)" devised by the states. These plans bring the basin plan into legal force and detail how much water can be taken from the system and how it is divided between users such as farmers, communities and the environment.

NSW must produce 20 plans. To date, [just five](#) are in place. [At least seven plans](#) by NSW were recently withdrawn to be re-drafted.

Until they're finalized, key measures of the basin plan cannot be implemented. The new NSW Minns government must prioritize the remaining water resource plans and have them accredited by the Commonwealth government.

## **2. Federal water buybacks must ramp up**

The Albanese government is taking steps to improve water recovery under the plan, such as [consulting stakeholders](#) and [restarting](#) water buybacks. But it must do more.

Both [NSW](#) and [Victoria](#) will almost certainly miss the 2024 deadline for delivering all [infrastructure projects](#) they promised to offset 605 billion liters of water.

The [federal government](#) is legally obliged to—and should—purchase additional water from farmers to cover any gap. It must also acquire more than 400 billion liters of water to make up for the shortfall in water efficiency projects.

For this to occur, a [Coalition-era cap](#) must be lifted from 1,500 billion liters to enable more federal government water purchases from farmers.

### **3. Abandon questionable water-saving projects**

At least six water-saving projects look unlikely to meet the deadline.

They include a large [project](#) proposed by the former NSW government to reduce evaporation at [Menindee Lakes](#), which [appears doomed](#).

Another [project at Yanco Creek](#) in NSW has also fallen behind, and four of the nine Victorian projects have been [paused](#).

What's more, the [ecological merit](#) of these projects are contested—as is the scientific rigor of the [proposed auditing](#) method. These projects should be abandoned in favor of reconnecting rivers to their floodplain.

### **4. Reconnect rivers and floodplains**

For floodplain wetlands to function, they must be regularly inundated with water. To date, just [2% of these parts](#) of the basin are inundated each year by managed flows (or in other words, intentional water releases by authorities).

The federal government holds water for this purpose. Delivering the water requires compensation for the owners of inundated properties, as well as upgraded roads, bridges and levee banks. Managed inundation can benefit landholders, such as by reducing the impacts of natural floods. But governments must do a better job of [communicating these benefits](#) to win support.

The federal government needs NSW and Victoria to help implement their agreement for watering floodplains, but this cooperation has been extremely slow.

## **5. Make information transparent**

The data and modeling used to manage water in the basin is complex and is often not publicly available.

In its [final report](#) in 2019, a South Australian [royal commission](#) into the Murray-Darling Basin was highly critical of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. The report found the authority failed to act on "the best available science" when determining how much water could be returned to the environment, and withheld modeling and other information that should have been made public.

Making such information freely available is crucial for accountability and to build public trust.

## **Time for tough decisions**

Each key element of the basin plan has encountered trouble at the implementation stage. The five steps I've outlined are essential to rectifying this.

Attention must now also turn to a review of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, which is legally required in 2026. As well as addressing the problems detailed above, it must address two big issues essentially ignored in the plan to date: the [lack of](#) Indigenous rights over water, and water losses due to [global warming](#) and other environmental change.

If the Albanese government is to uphold its election promise to deliver the plan, hard decisions—and trade-offs—will be required.

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