



River Lakes + Coorong Action Group



Lifeblood Alliance submission to Independent Assessment of Social and Economic Conditions in the Murray-Darling Basin (Draft terms of reference and assessment framework)

The **Lifeblood Alliance** consists of environmental, Indigenous and community groups committed to keeping the rivers, wetlands and aquifers of the Murray-Darling Basin healthy for the benefit of current and future generations.

We warmly welcome the appointment of an independent panel to assess the social and economic conditions of the Murray-Darling Basin. A broad ranging assessment that goes beyond the confines of the Basin Plan and looks at the conditions that affect all the Basin's communities is long overdue. We endorse the inclusive approach taken by the panel to include all those whose lives and livelihoods are strongly connected to water, which in effect means all the 2 million plus residents of the Basin. We hope the assessment will allow these communities to express their hope, fears and expectations for the future and reach a better understanding of the value and role that water plays in their lives.

However we are concerned that the terms of reference and assessment framework will limit the panel in their ability to meet their ambitions and restrict the outcomes to a familiar litany of complaint about the perceived impacts of water reform. We offer some suggestions about how the terms of reference and assessment framework could be improved to maximise the potential of the assessment.

Draft terms of reference

Term A sets a wide scope for the assessment beyond the impacts of water reform, which is most welcome.

Term B is more contentious. While we are pleased to see the water reform defined more broadly than just the Basin Plan, many communities perceive the impacts of water reform as negative without considering what would have happened had water reform *not* been undertaken. Over-allocation of water has been very damaging to rivers, floodplains and wetlands across the Murray-Darling and this has had a serious impact on the ecosystem services (including amenity and well-being) provided to communities as well as the intrinsic value of the ecosystems themselves. It is

important that the panel explores the consequences of continuing ‘business as usual’ as well as the impact of water reform.

Term D sets the panel the important task of disentangling structural and economic changes affecting communities from the impacts of water reform. The impacts of water reform itself need to be further dis-aggregated so that the impacts of each reform are assessed separately, as well as cumulatively. Such an approach would ensure that any positive or negative impacts arising from a particular reform, for example water trade, are not attributed to a different reform, for example environmental water recovery through buybacks.

It is essential to include the impacts of climate change under this term of reference. Climate change is influencing the long-term decline in water availability that is so challenging for communities, but on the other hand mitigation and adaptation initiatives will open up new opportunities and income streams. The Basin Plan itself should by law be a climate change adaptation plan.

We ask the panel to consider adding an additional **Term F** that requires consideration of the social and economic values of ecosystem services provided by the rivers, floodplains and wetlands of the Murray-Darling and how the loss of these services impacts on the resilience of communities.

Questions to be answered during the assessment

The panel is to be commended for setting out the ways in which they plan to tackle their task (p5). We value their commitment to evidence-based assessment and their recognition that successfully navigating the future requires a sound understanding of the past. We are however concerned that they are undermining their own commitment to ‘assess condition in, and impacts on and opportunities for Basin communities rather than specific sectors’ by singling out irrigated agriculture for specific attention. While irrigated agriculture is a major contributor to the basin economy, it is by no means the only contributor or even the major contributor, and it is already the recipient of substantial government investment through the Sustainable Rural Water Use and Infrastructure Program (SRWUIP). Other sectors such as dryland agriculture, grazing and tourism, and increasingly government services, are major employers and income generators and at least as important as irrigated agriculture to basin communities. The panel needs to take an even-handed approach to all sectors and communities rather than singling out specific industries for particular attention even before they have started gathering evidence.

Key questions

The panel is asking some excellent questions of communities. However we feel there are missing questions about the social and economic impacts of degraded river systems on communities, and how impacts are shared between different communities. For example over-extraction in the Barwon-Darling has had serious impacts for irrigators and stock and domestic users downstream on the Lower Darling, and more broadly upstream water use has had impacts for South Australian communities dependent on the Lower lakes and Coorong. Throughout the basin irrigation water use has had impacts for Indigenous nations, floodplain graziers and nature based tourism, in addition to the depletion of ecosystem services mentioned above.

We therefore suggest the following additional questions:

- What are the roles and values of water in MDB landscapes and how do we appropriately value them and share them?
- How have the water demands of the irrigation industry impacted on the viability of non-irrigation dependent communities and industries? What lessons can be learned from non-irrigation communities and enterprises that have adapted to reduced water availability and increased water insecurity?

The supplementary questions on water reform listed in Attachment B are equally important for non-irrigation communities as they are for irrigators. The communities of the Basin cannot be treated as independent entities, for example an irrigator who is short of water may be

seeking alternative employment in another sector or in town. All communities need economic diversity so they are not dependent on a single industry and so that when the going gets tough there are other ways to make a living.

Engagement, evidence gathering and reporting

The panel has an enormous amount of pre-existing material to work with. Evidence on social and economic conditions has been gathered by academics (in particular through the Regional Wellbeing Survey¹), state and federal government departments, the MDBA and communities themselves, with many useful suggestions made through submissions on previous water reform processes. The panel would be well advised to attempt a synthesis of some of this material to form the basis of their community consultation, so that they have something to present to communities rather than having to start from scratch in every circumstance. The latter approach lends itself to the reiteration of old grievances rather than the genuine discussion of values and future options that the panel wishes to have with basin communities. As the panel is well aware, it is also essential that all communities and individuals are able to express their views freely and without fear of repercussions. We make the following suggestions to assist in the community conversations:

- Some communities will prefer that consultation with the irrigation sector is separate from consultation with others, for example stock and domestic users, floodplain graziers.
- It may be desirable to piggyback a consultation meeting with other community events such as Scope, CWA or P&C etc meetings. A BBQ meal might encourage time-poor, doing-it-tough people to attend.
- Time poor landholders may prefer a video conference (if internet permits!) or phone conferences with panel members.
- Considering well-acknowledged consultation fatigue and prolonged drought conditions, costs of travel etc the panel should make clear its willingness to accept written and other submissions and presentations made by individuals as part of water reform, water planning and other relevant processes, such as evidence from the recent Citizens Inquiry into the health of the Darling River and Menindee Lakes.²

Members of the Lifeblood Alliance include Conservation Council of South Australia, Environment Victoria, Environmental Farmers Network, Friends of the Earth River Country, Goulburn Valley Environment Group, Healthy Rivers Dubbo, Inland Rivers Network, Murray Lower Darling Indigenous Nations, Nature Conservation Council, National Parks Association NSW, River Lakes and Coorong Action Group and Queensland Conservation.

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13 August 2019

¹ <https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/institutes/health-research-institute/regional-wellbeing-survey>

² <https://tribunal.org.au/aptribunal/darling-menindee/>