

Frequently Asked Questions

Victoria's North and Murray Water Resource Plan Consultation February 2019

Q1. What is a water resource plan?

Under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (2012) all Basin States must prepare water resource plans to show how they will meet Basin Plan requirements, including meeting new sustainable diversion limits on how much water can be taken from 2019. Victoria has prepared two water resource plans, to cover our five areas under the Basin Plan. The final water resource plans must be accredited by the Commonwealth Minister.

Q2. What will change because of the water resource plan?

We believe we can meet Basin Plan requirements under our existing legislation and planning instruments, including bulk water and environmental entitlements, groundwater management plans, and sustainable water strategies. The draft Victoria's North and Murray Water Resource Plan explains how we will do this.

Q3. What doesn't the water resource plan deal with? Why?

The water resource plan does not create any significant new policy for Victoria and it does not change other Victorian government policy in relation to other Basin Plan-related matters. For example:

- Water recovery
- Water recovery above 2750GL
- Regulatory arrangements
- Delivery shares
- Amend water entitlements or create new entitlements.

Q4. What impact will Victoria's North and Murray Water Resource Plan have on me?

We don't anticipate Victoria's North and Murray Water Resource Plan will change what you do in your town, on your farm or at home. We don't believe we need to make significant changes to meet the Basin Plan requirements - the draft plan has been released for discussion.

Q5. Why do a Water Resource Plan when it doesn't change anything?

A water resource plan is a mandatory component of implementing the Basin Plan. Water resource plans demonstrate how Victoria will comply with limits on water use set out in the Basin Plan (the Sustainable Diversion Limit). It's important that all States are transparent about how water is managed in the Basin.

Q6. Why should I read and provide feedback on the Water Resource Plan if it doesn't change anything? What kind of feedback are you looking for?

The draft plan sets out how Victoria meets the Basin Plan requirements through Victoria's robust water management arrangements. We are looking for feedback from the community regarding whether the draft plan reflects the water management operations in effect on the ground, and/or whether these could be improved to better meet stakeholder or community needs.

Q7. Should I still make a submission if I'm unsure about whether the issues that matter to me are dealt with in the Water Resource Plan?

Yes. All submissions will be reviewed and acknowledged. Should the matters you raise not be relevant to the plan, the matter will be directed to the relevant department or policy area for consideration.

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Q8. How do I make a submission?

Written submissions are accepted until 5PM 18 March 2019 via the Engage Victoria website, via post and e-mail (see details at the end of this handout). All submissions will be considered, and amendments made to the Water Resource Plan where necessary. All submissions will be published at the end of the consultation process, unless you indicate that you would like yours to remain confidential.

Q9. What is the process of accreditation?

The final water resource plan must be lodged with the MDBA by 30 April 2019 for assessment. At the same time, the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) will assess the consultation with Traditional Owners and provide an assessment to the MDBA. Following assessment, the MDBA will make a recommendation to the Commonwealth Minister regarding whether the Plan should be accredited. It is the decision of the Commonwealth Minister whether to accredit a Water Resource Plan.

This is expected to take place prior to 1 July 2019. The accredited Water Resource Plan then becomes a statutory document under the Basin Plan.

Q10. What happens if Victoria's North and the Murray Water Resource Plan is not accredited?

If the Commonwealth Minister responsible for water decides not to accredit Victoria's North and Murray Water Resource Plan, then Victoria can go to mediation and challenge the decision. If this does not resolve the issues, the Commonwealth Minister for Water may require the MDBA to write components of the Water Resource Plan that the Commonwealth Minister considers do not meet the requirements of Chapter 10 of Basin Plan.

Even if the Water Resource Plan is lodged and not accredited by 30 June 2019, Victoria will still need to comply with sustainable diversion limits from 1 July 2019. We have processes in place in the case that the water resource plan is not accredited by 30 June 2019.

Q11. What would it mean if the MDBA wrote Victoria's water resource plans?

If the MDBA were asked to prepare Victoria's water resource plans there would be delays and uncertainty for all northern Victorian water users, including the environment.

Q12. Why has NSW received a 10-month extension to submit their water resource plans for accreditation?

NSW requested an extension to best meet its Basin Plan requirements.

We support the NSW extension so that NSW has time to best align their water framework with the Basin Plan requirements and ensure it is able to deliver Basin Plan outcomes.

This extension is also an opportunity for the Victorian Government and Victorian residents to review the NSW water resource plans and have a say on the issues through the NSW public consultation and submission processes.

Q13. Is Victoria getting an extension?

Yes. Victoria has been granted a two-month extension to enable submission by 30 April 2019. Victoria is on track to meet the extension timelines agreed with the MDBA.

Q14. What are the next steps for Victoria?

The draft plan for northern Victoria has been prepared and Victoria is now seeking input and feedback from communities across northern Victoria through extensive consultation.

The consultation includes public forums and the option to provide written submissions through EngageVic from 21 January to 18 March 2019.

Following public consultation, Victoria's North and Murray Water Resource Plan will be finalised and formally submitted to the MDBA for assessment on 30 April 2019.

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Q15. Will there be enough time to incorporate the comments and suggested changes that come out of public consultation before submitting the final plan to the MDBA for accreditation? What is the timeline?

Submissions close on 18 March 2019 at 5pm. We will review the submissions and incorporate the feedback into the plan. Where comments have been submitted on issues that the plan does not deal with, we will pass them on to the appropriate policy area for their consideration. We aim to submit the final plan with feedback incorporated by 30 April 2019 to the MDBA. A further extension can be requested should we find that the quality of the plan will be compromised due to having insufficient time to consider all feedback.

Q16. How was the draft Water Resource Plan developed? Which stakeholders are being engaged? Is it balanced?

DELWP consulted with key federal, state and local government agencies, Traditional Owners, and environmental groups to develop the draft water resource plan.

Representatives from water corporations, catchment management authorities, Traditional Owners and environment groups were invited to be part of a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) to provide expertise and advice on the development of the draft plan. Farming and industry groups were also consulted for their perspectives.

The Victorian government has sought feedback from the MDBA throughout the development process to ensure we have the best chance of accreditation of the water resource plan.

Q17. What do WRPs do for Traditional Owners?

Through the WRPs, Traditional Owner groups have submitted contributions that identify their objectives and outcomes in relation to water resource management. The contributions from the Nations represented in the Water Resource Plan are a clear roadmap for Government seeking to include Traditional Owners in water resource management planning and decision making in the future. This provides an important opportunity and we will build on this through the implementation of the Aboriginal Water Policy as we continue to develop partnerships with Traditional Owners in water resource management.

Q18. There has been talk in the media about a Productivity Commission and a Royal Commission. What are these about and do they impact on the water resource plan?

The Productivity Commission is the Australian Government's independent research and advisory body on a range of economic, social and environmental issues affecting the welfare of Australians. The Basin Plan has a built-in process to assess the effectiveness of the implementation of the Basin Plan and water resource plans. Under the *Commonwealth Water Act 2007*, the Productivity Commission is required to assess the effectiveness of Basin Plan implementation every 5 years. This inquiry is the first such assessment conducted by the Commission. The Commission has considered the views of communities and governments across the Basin. The Murray-Darling Basin Plan: Five-year Assessment Productivity Commission Inquiry Report was handed to the Commonwealth Government on the 31 December 2019 and released publicly on 25 January 2019.

The Productivity Commission acknowledges the good progress that has been made to deliver the Basin Plan and outlines that there are challenges ahead. The Commission calls for immediate action to ensure delivery of an effective Basin Plan.

Victoria will thoroughly assess the recommendations because it is important we get the foundations right and build community confidence in how the Basin Plan is being implemented.

The Productivity Commission made recommendations regarding water resource plans which have either already been actioned or which will be further considered by governments. The Plan has always been about balancing social and environmental outcomes and Victoria's track record is strong.

The South Australian Government announced a Murray Darling Basin Royal Commission following allegations of water theft and compliance in the northern basin. The final report of this Commission was released on 31 January 2019.



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This report provides additional information on the Murray-Darling Basin, including recommendations that work on water resource plans should be completed as far as possible.

The State of Victoria provided a voluntary submission to the Royal Commission outlining Victoria's position on a number of key issues. Victoria also facilitated visits by the Royal Commission to some key Victorian sites, including Hattah Lakes to show firsthand the benefits of environmental watering, such as improved riparian vegetation, and increased bird and fish populations.

These reports are unlikely to change what is happening in Victoria in relation to water resource plans. Victoria is progressing well with the development of its two water resource plans for the Wimmera-Mallee and Victoria's North and Murray. Victoria formally submitted the Wimmera-Mallee Water Resource Plan to the MDBA for Assessment on 29 June 2018 and has prepared the draft Water Resource Plan for Victoria's North and Murray, with expected submission for assessment to the MDBA by 30 April 2019.

Q19. What are Sustainable Diversion Limits?

The Basin Plan sets limits on how much water can be taken from the Basin for irrigation, drinking water, industry or for other purposes in the future – these limits are called Sustainable Diversion Limits, or SDLs. The SDL is a volume of extraction that will not have a negative impact on the natural environments and the functions of the rivers, waterways, groundwater and wetlands of the Basin.

- Sustainable diversion limits come into effect from 1 July 2019
- So that SDLs can be met, governments agreed that a long-term average annual volume of 2,750 gigalitres (GL) of water for the environment would be recovered across the Basin.
- Victoria's share is a long-term average annual volume of 1,075 GL, which is about 40 per cent of total Basin water recovery.
- Of this, 1052.3 GL comes from the area covered by Victoria's North and Murray Water Resource Plan.

Q20. Is implementing the Basin Plan the best way to support the environment to prepare for drought?

The increased flows created by the Basin Plan will help build healthy resilient rivers, floodplains and wetlands. This means they will be more resilient to dry conditions. Even during drought there will be more water for the environment than previously. The environmental water can be targeted to sites where it is most needed.

The environmental infrastructure already in place and that will be built as part of the Basin Plan will mean that large areas of floodplain can be watered that would otherwise have missed out.

Environmental infrastructure is critical in supporting the environment through drought. Using environmental infrastructure, water can be delivered in drought and dry conditions to maintain healthy refuges that plants and animals can shelter in, allowing the environment to recover after drought and expand when wetter periods return.

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Q21. What does the water resource plan mean for environmental water?

The water resource plans document how the SDLs will be achieved and how recovered environmental water is managed to ensure consistency with basin plan objectives and the Basin environmental watering strategy.

The Basin Plan sets limits on the amount of water that can be taken for consumptive use from the Murray-Darling Basin. These are known as sustainable diversion limits (SDL) and come into effect from 1 July 2019. To meet SDLs, governments are recovering water to be held and used by environmental water holders to improve the health of the Basin.

Recovered water is used to improve the environmental health of the Murray-Darling Basin's rivers, wetlands and floodplains, and the habitats of plants and animals that rely on the river system. The effects of past environmental watering have already produced beneficial outcomes for river, wetland and floodplain ecosystems – like waterbird breeding events at Barmah Forest. Environmental watering also has important social, cultural and economic benefits. It has been found to support recreational activities, sustain Country for Traditional Owners and improve water quality for farmers.

Q22. Is the Basin Plan delivering for the environment?

The full benefits of the Basin Plan will take some time to accurately measure – we are only five years into an 11-year plan – but we are already seeing real on-ground environmental outcomes, particularly through Victoria's own environmental watering program. This includes improved vegetation, fish populations and waterbird breeding.

The Department has published the environmental outcomes already achieved in Victoria in a Victorian Basin Plan Environmental Report Card, available on the DELWP website - <https://www.water.vic.gov.au/reportcard>

Q23. How was the risk assessment done? Why is this section so big?

The risk assessment was done over a 12-month period at the beginning of the water resource plan development process in 2016-17. The risk assessment was undertaken by a team of technical experts at DELWP and a reference group made up of catchment management authorities, the VEWH and environmental, Aboriginal and agricultural stakeholders.

Victoria conducted a thorough risk assessment which looked at multiple causes of risk, their impact on the availability and quality of surface and groundwater resources and their impact on priority environmental assets.

Q24. What does the risk assessment say about Aboriginal values and uses?

The risk assessment revealed that there are a multitude of risks to Aboriginal values and uses of water resources. The reason for this is that how Aboriginal people and Traditional Owners value and use water in Victoria is not imbedded in Victoria water resource management.

This means that a precautionary approach to risk assessment is required until more information can be gathered about the risks.

This is why the Victorian Government is committed to the continued implementation of the Aboriginal Water program which is investing in working with Traditional Owners to understand their objectives and outcomes with regard to how water is managed.

The continued implementation of the Aboriginal Water program has therefore been identified through the water resource plans as a key strategy to better understand and subsequently manage these types of risks. By identifying the program as a strategy to address these risks Victoria is required to report back to the MDBA on the implementation of the program.

Q25. Why didn't the water resource plan consider the impact of forestry on reduced catchment yields?

Land-use change and its impacts on interception was considered in the risk assessment. The risk assessment found there was a low to medium risk associated with a 5 per cent increase in the existing area of plantations. The risk assessment addressed known risks and the department already has strategies in place to attempt to

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mitigate these risks. While there may be localised risks which are much higher, the water resource plan took a catchment scale view of risks.

Water for Victoria has committed government to look further into different forms of take. This includes water users or uses that extract or intercept large volumes of water. If you think forestry needs to be considered, we welcome your feedback so that it can be included as part of our work program under *Water for Victoria*.

Q26. Will the water resource plan stop people building dams?

Victoria's North and Murray Water Resource Plan does not change licensing arrangements for farm dams or alter rights to take water for domestic and stock purposes.

The Victorian Water Act permits landholders to build runoff dams without a licence if the dam is not located on a waterway, it is not hazardous and the water is not used for irrigation or commercial purposes. These conditions significantly restrict the amount of water that can be taken by each of these runoff dams.

The first condition prohibiting the construction of runoff dams on waterways, including floodplains, limits the size of the local catchment above the dam site and consequently the runoff available to be captured. Dam sites with potential to reliably harvest significant volumes of runoff will be on waterways and will always require a licence.

The condition that requires a licence for dams supplying irrigation and commercial uses removes the financial incentive to make runoff dams bigger than what is required for domestic.

The water resource plan does not propose any changes to existing arrangements for building runoff dams.

While the water resource plan does not change the management of these interception activities it does identify how they will be accounted for and how any increases in take under these activities will be managed.

Q27. What does the water resource plan do to protect water users from drought and blue-green algae?

Water resource plans are required to identify how water resources are managed in response to extreme dry events (drought) and extreme water quality events (such as blue green algae), with a focus on critical human water needs. The plan outlines the tools available under Victoria's framework to manage these events which include

- Urban water restrictions
- Qualification of Rights

The water resource plan makes no changes to existing extreme event management arrangements but relies on existing arrangements already in place in Victoria.

In addition, the risk assessment assessed the impact of a variety of extreme events such as drought, flooding, bushfire and their potential impact on water quality and availability. The water resource plan outlines strategies for addressing these risks.

Q28. What is the water resource plan doing in response to climate change?

The Basin Plan does not specifically require water resource plans to address climate change. Victoria has, however, identified climate change as a high risk to all uses in its risk assessment and outlined strategies and tools under Victoria's framework to respond to these risks. Water resource plans commit to continue these strategies.

Water is a highly valuable resource and in our drying climate, we will have less of it available. It is important that we manage our water as efficiently as possible to make the most of our limited water resources. Climate change is identified as a current and future risk to Victoria's Basin resources which ensures it remains a focus of water resource management regardless of political agenda.

Q29. What does the water resource plan do to support recreational values?

The water resource plan gives further weight to the policy actions from *Water for Victoria* to support recreational uses in northern Victoria, and ways to improve recreational outcomes for communities. There is explicit recognition of the risks to recreational uses and the strategies in place to address these risks.



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Q30. What does the water resource plan do to manage congestion risks in northern Victoria?

The risk assessment identifies changes to the timing and location of water demands associated with increased agricultural water use downstream of the Barmah Choke including the Sunraysia region and ongoing developments in environmental watering demands which may change over time.

The water resource plan also considers how these changes in timing and location of demand can impact priority environmental assets and identified the potential for very high risks to some priority environmental assets associated with changing water delivery patterns. This includes damage to the instream physical habitat of these rivers and wetlands due to artificially high flows particularly in summer periods.

By identifying these risks as medium or higher the water resource plan is required to identify strategies to manage these risks. Through the water resource plans Victoria has committed to implementing actions already identified in *Water for Victoria* which look to improve trading rules, work with key stakeholders like the MDBA to manage congestion and environmental and other third party impacts that changes to the timing and location of water demands could cause and continue to improve environmental water delivery based on the best available information.

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Want to know more or make a submission?



Go to the the Victorian Government's Online Consultation website 'Engage Victoria' to view the draft water resource plan:

<https://engage.vic.gov.au/water-resource-plan-northern-victoria>

You can also 'follow' us and see when there are updates to consultation on the plan.



Email: WRPTeam@delwp.vic.gov.au

Make a submission in writing:



Victoria's North and Murray Water Resource Plan

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East Melbourne VIC 8002

Got a question?

✉ Email us: WRPTeam@delwp.vic.gov.au

☎ Call us: (03) 9637 9976

Don't forget

Submissions close 5pm 18 March 2019