

WENTWORTH GROUP OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS

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RESPONSE TO MINISTER PLIBERSEK'S ANNOUNCEMENT OF A NEW AGREEMENT TO IMPLEMENT THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN PLAN

24 August 2023

The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists welcomes the recent announcement by the Commonwealth Minister for Water, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek of a new agreement with Basin jurisdictions to deliver the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

We applaud the Federal Government for taking decisive steps to implement their election commitments to restore the health of the Murray and Darling River systems and deliver their obligations under national and international agreements.

The Murray-Darling Basin is still over-extracted. The recovery of 3,200 GL / year in water for the environment under the Basin Plan is essential to maintain the health of these rivers and the people who rely on them.

The past decade of stalling by the federal, NSW and Victorian governments has meant that that the 2023-24 Basin Plan deadlines need be extended to ensure that the outstanding ~700 GL in water for the environment is recovered and that other agreed measures are delivered.

We encourage all Basin governments to work together to develop a broad well-structured portfolio of genuine water recovery measures to deliver the remaining water, including opportunities for improved connectivity in the Northern Basin to contribute to water recovery targets and improve the health of the Darling-Baarka system.

Additional water recovery must be complemented by governance reforms designed to ensure that this water is delivered and achieving the necessary ecological, cultural, and social outcomes in a changing climate. This includes, but is not limited to, reforms to increase transparency and accountability in relation to water accounting and hydrological modelling.

There remains an urgent need for federal and state governments to redouble their efforts to “relax constraints” on floodplains, to maximise the benefits of water recovered by allowing water to spill out of river channels onto floodplain wetlands.

The proposal to allow more water offset projects (“SDLAM projects”) risks further delays given the poor results and project failures to date. Stronger transparency and accountability measures and legislative changes are needed to hold the governments to account on their commitments and guarantee outcomes for the Basin.

We welcome the New South Wales government decision to support the new agreement and commend the new NSW Water Minister, the Hon. Rose Jackson for recommitting NSW to delivering the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

While we are disappointed that the Victorian Government has not yet supported the new agreement, we acknowledge the ongoing concerns about impacts of water buybacks on rural and regional communities, in addition to the many other pressures currently facing those communities.

We believe there are better ways to address socio-economic impacts on communities than through the current socio-economic test which has been an ongoing barrier to water recovery. We recommend that governments agree to provide a Regional Development Package to support communities adapt to a future with less water, address adverse third-party impacts, and help ensure the ongoing liveability, sustainability and resilience of rural and regional cities, townships, and communities.

We encourage all governments to work in a spirit of cooperation to deliver the Murray-Darling Plan and re-build the trust and dialogue needed to achieve the best outcomes for the community and the river health in the long term.