

# The Murray-Darling Basin Initiative



History of NRM in South Australia  
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## THE BROADENING PHASE: 1981 TO THE PRESENT

Much has been achieved in 37 meetings of the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council over the last 19 years:

- The Council held its first meeting in Sydney on 27 August 1986. Gareth Evans and Barry Cohen represented the Commonwealth. New South Wales was represented by Janice Crosio, Jack Hallam and Bob Carr; Victoria by Evan Walker and Andrew McCutcheon, and South Australia by Don Hopgood and Kym Mayes.
- The *Murray-Darling Basin Agreement* was amended on 30 October 1987, and came into effect on 1 January 1988. This amendment established the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, replacing the River Murray Commission, with an attendant change in the focus of management from water quality and security of supply considerations for the River Murray to integrated natural resources management within the entire Murray-Darling Basin.
- The 1988 Salinity and Drainage Strategy, which has had the demonstrated effect of reversing the growth of salinity in the River Murray, while allowing an accountable trade off with new developments.
- The *Murray-Darling Basin Agreement* was again amended in 1992, and ratified in all jurisdictions by the *Murray-Darling Basin Act 1993*. This amendment provided for other jurisdictions to join the *Agreement*, and Queensland did just that in the same year. We should not underestimate the importance of Queensland, with 25% of the Basin in that State, joining the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement. Queensland, being the upstream State, had the least to gain from joining the Commission and Council, but clearly felt that it had something to offer. In a variety of ways, this has proved to be the case, and it is evident that Queensland has been able to put forward fresh views on issues that are not limited by 150 years of 'sound and fury'.
- An Algal Management Strategy was approved in 1994, which led to the adoption of a Flow Management Policy: *to maintain and, where appropriate, improve existing flow regimes in the waterways of the Murray-Darling Basin to protect and enhance the riverine environment.*
- The 1995 cap on water diversions, based on an audit of water use in the Basin, was then the most important decision in the 80 year life of the *Agreement*.
- The 1997 approval of a Pilot Program for permanent interstate trade opened up opportunities for a growth in the economic value of irrigation water within tight environmental controls, while softening the impacts of structural adjustment.
- In 1998, the Government of the Australian Capital Territory established formal links with the Murray-Darling Basin Initiative through a Memorandum of Understanding signed by all six governments of the Basin.
- In 2000, for the first time the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council, at its 28<sup>th</sup> meeting on 24 March in Canberra, seriously addressed the matter of environmental flows in the River Murray. (On 6 December 2000, the governments of New South Wales, Victoria and the Commonwealth announced they had reached a Heads of Agreement to restore environmental flows to the Snowy River).
- On 30 March 2001, the Council adopted a vision and 15 objectives for a healthy working River Murray; and in September of the same year released the Murray-Darling Basin Salinity Management Strategy (a successor of the 1988 Salinity and Drainage Strategy).

- On 29 August 2003, the Council of Australian Governments meeting in Canberra noted an agreement by Murray-Darling Basin governments (excluding Queensland) to provide \$500 million over five years to restore the health of the River Murray. On 14 November, the 34th meeting of the Ministerial Council in Melbourne made the First Step decision to recover 500 GL of additional flow in the River Murray within five years, the benefits of which will be assessed at six significant ecological assets.
- On 25 June 2004, the *Intergovernmental Agreement on Addressing Water Over allocation and Achieving Environmental Objectives in the Murray-Darling Basin* was signed by the Commonwealth Government and the Governments of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory.
- On 9 May 2006, the Commonwealth Treasurer announced in the budget an allocation of an additional \$500 million to meet all previous Council and Commission commitments, including for environmental works and measures and for water recovery. This marked an important turning point whereby the Commonwealth flagged its intention to take a lead role rather than just a facilitating role within the Murray-Darling Basin Initiative.
- On 25 January 2007, Prime Minister Howard unveiled a \$10 billion, 10 year *National Plan for Water Security*, mainly focussed on the plight of the Murray-Darling Basin, and which was predicated on States referring powers to manage the Basin to the Commonwealth. About a third of the funds were to be used in buying back water entitlements from irrigators. All Murray-Darling States and Territories signed on to the *National Plan for Water Security* except Victoria.
- On 24 November 2007, the Howard Government was defeated at the General Election with Kevin Rudd becoming Prime Minister and Penny Wong becoming the relevant Commonwealth Minister for the Murray-Darling Basin. Throughout the election campaign Mr Rudd promised a more cooperative working relationship between the States/Territories and the Commonwealth Government.