

**Environmental Flows: The Living Murray Initiative, Australia**  
**Report for the Global Ministerial Environment Forum**  
**Jeju, Korea, 29-31 March 2004**

## **1. Description of the Initiative**

### *Background*

The Murray-Darling Basin river catchments cover an area of 1.06 million km<sup>2</sup>, or 14 per cent of Australia's land area. It is located in the states of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. Annual economic output from the Basin is around AUD\$23 billion (USD\$16.79 billion). AUD\$10 billion (USD\$7.3 billion) of this is from agriculture, equivalent to almost one third of the value of Australia's total annual agricultural output.

While use of the Basin's resources has brought huge benefit to Australia, this has had some detrimental ecological, cultural, social and economic consequences. In recognition that (under Australia's federated system of government) no one government alone was able to effectively manage the Basin's emerging natural resource management problems, the federal and relevant state governments negotiated the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement in October 1985 (which replaced the earlier 1915 River Murray Waters Agreement). Its aim is *"to promote and co-ordinate effective planning and management for the equitable, efficient and sustainable use of the water, land and other environmental resources of the Murray-Darling Basin"*.

The management structure established to underpin the governance of the Agreement comprises:

- the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council, the decision-making forum;
- the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, the executive and advisory arm of the Council; and
- the Community Advisory Committee, which provides the Council with advice and provides a two-way communication channel between the Council and the community.

### *The Living Murray Initiative*

The Living Murray Initiative was developed to respond to the declining health of the River Murray and Murray-Darling Basin and aims to "create a healthy working river that assures us of continued prosperity, clean water and a flourishing environment". Murray-Darling governments have stressed the importance of having sound knowledge systems, effective community engagement, and appropriate governance structures as essential precursors to consideration of equitable access arrangements and the allocation of environmental flows. Murray-Darling governments also agreed to development of water recovery mechanisms and the provision of environmental flows to the system in order to improve the health of the river. However, this is balanced against other ecological parameters that contribute to river health and also the economic and social requirements of river users, including irrigators and river communities.

The Living Murray Initiative has progressed through a number of stages since its inception:

1. An initial period of investigation (including scientific, economic and social analysis). This was facilitated by the use of three reference points of possible volumes of increased environmental flows to the River Murray, to assess the costs and benefits of recovering water for the environment. These reference points were used to initiate discussion and analysis, rather than being firm options for possible volumes of water for future application as environmental flows.
2. In parallel with the investigations, an extensive community consultation process took place. This aimed to seek advice from the community about how to respond to issues concerning the future of the River Murray. It adopted both a local and a Basin-wide approach, seeking involvement with local and regional stakeholders, including Indigenous communities, people in affected regions, and the general public more broadly.
3. Drawing on the outcomes of the consultation and investigations, the Ministerial Council agreed to undertake a 'first step' proposal towards restoring the River Murray to a healthy working river. The 'first step' will initially focus on achieving specified environmental outcomes for six significant ecological assets along the river system. Five of these areas include Ramsar-listed wetlands and the sixth is the River Murray channel itself. This will require effective management of an average of 500 gegalitres of water per year, to be recovered over five years through a combination of water use efficiency gains, infrastructure improvement, and possibly the direct purchase of water. A part of the 'first step' will also include a comprehensive community engagement and communications strategy that will inform, involve and seek community input to the nature and elements of the first step.
4. Currently, the Living Murray Initiative is at the stage of initiating the implementation of the first step decision. Activities underway include looking at water recovery options, developing and implementing a program of capital works to help achieve the desired ecological outcomes and initiating the community consultation.
5. Into the future, the Initiative will continue the implementation of its first step actions and determine future requirements for management and provision of environmental flows for the River Murray. All these actions will be in the context of the overall goal of achieving a healthy working river, achieving a balance between the needs of the environment and the communities that rely on the resources of the river for their livelihoods and recreation.

Important elements of the Living Murray Initiative have been:

- the integrated yet flexible nature of the proposal – balancing ecological, social and economic objectives and providing for the needs of both the environment and consumptive users (eg irrigators);
- the detailed community consultation that has been a fundamental part of all stages of development and implementation;
- the phased approach – 'learning by doing';

- a significant shift in emphasis from seeing environmental flows as being about the delivery of specified volumes of water to being more about achieving specific, agreed environmental outcomes; and
- the importance of a strong underpinning governance framework to provide the basis for decision-making and cooperative action.

For further information on the Living Murray Initiative or integrated water and natural resource management in the Murray-Darling Basin, see [www.mdbc.gov.au](http://www.mdbc.gov.au).

## **2. Mainstreaming/Sustainability**

This Initiative is being integrated into national budget and management frameworks through a range of actions including:

- Development of an intergovernmental agreement for funding to address water over-allocation in the Murray-Darling Basin (\$500 million over five years).
- Implementation will be supported by, and is being developed in parallel with, the National Water Initiative, a national water reform agenda currently under negotiation.
- Establishment of strong links with the two major national natural resource management funding programs, the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality and the Natural Heritage Trust.
- Oversight through the multi-jurisdictional Murray-Darling Basin Agreement, Ministerial Council and Commission.

## **3. Replicating the Initiative**

The delivery of environmental flows either through direct purchasing of water or through the implementation of water efficiency infrastructure can be applied in other countries of the world. However, for an initiative such as The Living Murray to be successfully implemented, an established integrated water management framework needs to be in place.

A number of lessons have been learnt through the development and implementation of the Living Murray Initiative. These include, but are not limited to:

- the need for transparency and accountability in decision making;
- the need for adequate community consultation and participation in decision making;
- the need for robust scientific conclusions to support policy decisions and the mechanisms to describe these to the general public; and
- the need for integrated management of waterways to complement site-specific management.

The Department of the Environment and Heritage has developed three national documents to provide guidance for the delivery of environmental flows. These, and additional information regarding environmental flows in Australia can be found at [www.deh.gov.au/water/rivers/nrhp/flows/projects.html](http://www.deh.gov.au/water/rivers/nrhp/flows/projects.html) - national.