

## SUBMISSION GUIDE

# Have your say: Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review

Until **Friday 1 May 2026**, the **Murray-Darling Basin Authority** is inviting people and organisations to share their views on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper including:

- The assessment of limits on water taken by users
- water for the environment
- river connectivity in the northern Basin
- floodplain and wetland health
- native fish decline
- water quality
- water infrastructure and water needs
- regulatory design
- improving science and knowledge.

**The Basin Plan review is a once-in-a-decade chance to shape how water is managed across the Murray-Darling Basin for years to come, in a warming and still stressed system. With strong public input, we can help secure a Basin Plan that restores rivers, supports communities, and responds to the challenges of a changing climate.**

Submissions are a formal part of the review process and are considered alongside expert advice. That means they're powerful; with real potential to influence the review's final recommendations and show decision-makers that Australians expect a fairer, more sustainable plan grounded in law, science, and healthy rivers and communities.

## What is this consultation about?

The **Murray-Darling Basin Plan** (the Basin Plan) is a national framework that aims to manage water across the Murray-Darling Basin and ensure enough water remains in rivers and wetlands to ensure they are healthy ecosystems.

The Basin Plan was created in 2012 after the **Millennium Drought** pushed the system to crisis point. In response, the federal government and the five Basin states and territories agreed on a new national approach to water management: the Basin Plan.

The Basin Plan sets legal limits on how much water can be taken from the Basin each year for uses such as irrigation and town supply. Since 2012 it has required lowering the amount of water that can be taken out of rivers and wetlands because of historic overextraction. This water supports waterbird breeding, ensures wetlands receive the flooding they need, and helps the river flow all the way from its source to the sea.

The law requires the Basin Plan to be reviewed every decade, with the next review scheduled for this year.

The review will assess whether the Basin Plan is working for communities and the environment, identify where it has fallen short, and help shape what the next version of the Basin Plan should look like. It will also make recommendations to Basin governments on whether and how the Basin Plan should change in the future.

You can read more about the [Murray-Darling Basin Plan and review here](#).

## Looking for general advice on submission writing?

The best submissions are unique. Good submissions generally:

- **Are concise** and well-structured
- Emphasise the **key points** so that they are clear
- **Outline concerns** as well as suggesting **recommendations** to address them
- Only include information and documents that are **directly relevant** to your key points.

You can find more advice from EJA on how to write a good submission, [here](#).

**If you have any questions, feedback on this toolkit, need additional support or want to share your submission with us, get in touch at [hello@envirojustice.org.au](mailto:hello@envirojustice.org.au)**

## How to lodge your submission

### OPTION 1: Have your say via email

Note: We encourage you to make a written submission via email so that you can tailor it to suit your concerns.

1. **Draft your submission:** Write your submission and save it on your computer (for example as a Word document or PDF).
2. **Email your submission:** Send your document to [BPRsubmissions@mdba.gov.au](mailto:BPRsubmissions@mdba.gov.au) with the subject line “BPR Submission”, and attach your submission to the email.

### OPTION 2: Have your say via the online survey

1. **Open the consultation page:** <https://getinvolved.mdba.gov.au/2026basinplanreview> and select “2026 Basin Plan Review online submission.”
2. **Work through the form:** You’ll be asked to:
  - a. agree to the privacy notice and terms and conditions
  - b. choose your publishing preferences
  - c. provide your personal or organisational details
  - d. review the survey instructions
  - e. upload any supporting files (optional)
3. **Add your feedback:** Respond to the three questions in the text boxes provided:
  - a. Note: You may find it easier to **draft your answers in a separate document and paste them in.**
  - b. What do you think of the issues and options presented in the Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper?
    - i. This may be a good place for you to raise issue 1 and 2 from this guide.
  - c. Are there other issues and options that should be considered?
  - d. What do you see as the priorities, and why?
    - i. This may be a good place for you to raise issue 3 and 4 from this guide.
4. **Complete the declaration and submit:** Indicate whether your submission includes any Indigenous or cultural intellectual property, then click Submit.

# According to EJA lawyers – what are the key issues?

Environmental Justice Australia’s legal experts have carefully reviewed the discussion paper and the Basin Plan and identified four key issues you might like to raise in your submission.

Click on each link to read more EJA lawyer views:

1. [Meeting the Water Act’s standards](#)
2. [The science behind the review](#)
3. [The environmental health of the Basin](#)
4. [Water justice for Traditional Owners](#)

# 1

## Meeting the Water Act's standards

### Key points

- By law, the Basin Plan must be based on **the best available science** and set water limits that keep the Basin healthy.
- Current limits were set over a decade ago and may not reflect **updated science or current environmental conditions**.
- The Review should ensure the Plan meets the **ambition and requirements** of the law that set it up.

### Overview

The Basin Plan gets its legal authority from the **Water Act 2007**, which sets the rules it must follow. The Water Act is **world-leading** because it puts the health of rivers and ecosystems first, and requires decisions about water use to be based on the **best available science**. It's important that this standard is fully reflected in the Basin Plan.

A key requirement is that the Plan sets **long-term limits on how much water can be taken from the Basin**. These limits, known as **Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs)**, must be based on environmental needs, not economic or political trade-offs.

The SDLs must ensure enough water remains in the system to **protect and restore rivers, wetlands, forests and the plants and animals that depend on them**. This reflects the primary purpose of the Water Act as an environmental law.

However, the current SDLs were set in **2012**, according to a process that was controversial and problematic. Evidence shows that the Basin and its ecosystems are still under significant pressure.

In 2019, the **South Australian Royal Commission into the Murray-Darling Basin** examined how these limits were set. It found they did not properly reflect the requirements of the Water Act, including the need to base decisions on the best available science. These findings reinforce the importance of reassessing, robustly and according to law, whether current water limits are sufficient to achieve a healthy Basin.

**Environmental Justice Australia's legal experts are concerned that the current Review does not clearly address whether The Basin Plan meets the standards and requirements set under the Water Act.**

**If you share these concerns, our recommendations are outlined below.**

## **Recommendations:**

**The MDBA should update the Basin Plan to meet the standards and requirements of the Water Act by:**

1. Ensuring the Basin Plan reliably **delivers enough water to support a healthy and resilient Basin**.
2. Ensuring the amounts of water left in rivers and wetlands is **driven first and foremost by environmental outcomes**, and economic trade-offs occur within an environmentally sustainable Basin.
3. Including a clear pathway to further **reduce water extraction** according to law and science.
4. Engaging with the findings of the **South Australian Royal Commission into the Murray-Darling Basin**.

# 2

## The science behind the review

### Overview

As outlined above, the **Water Act requires the Basin Plan to be based on ‘the best available science’**. However, some of the science used to develop and implement the 2012 Basin Plan has been criticised for lacking credibility and transparency. The South Australian Royal Commission into the Murray-Darling Basin raised concerns that parts of the evidence used did not meet the standard of ‘the best available science’.

Scientific knowledge about the Basin has also come a long way since the Basin Plan began in 2012. A large body of **independent, peer-reviewed research** over the past decade now raises serious concerns about the health of the Basin.

**Much of this research does not appear to be reflected in the MDBA’s discussion paper for the current review.** Some of the science relied on in the paper also does not appear to have been independently peer-reviewed. In addition, key technical models and modelling reports used to assess the Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) have not been made publicly available. Without this evidence, it is impossible to confidently assess whether the proposed water limits will protect the Basin’s ecosystems.

If you share these concerns, our recommendations are outlined below.

## Recommendations:

### The MDBA should:

1. **Use the best available science in the Basin Plan Review** and explain how it has done so.
2. **Engage with independent scientific experts** and explain how this expert input has informed its conclusions.
3. **Release the technical models and modelling reports** used to assess Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs).

# 3

## The environmental health of the Basin

### Overview

As outlined above in reference to issue 1, **The Basin Plan sets limits on how much water can be taken from the Basin, known as ‘Sustainable Diversion Limits’**. These limits are meant to ensure enough water remains in rivers, wetlands and floodplains to support the Basin’s ecosystems over the long term.

The aim is not only to protect what remains, but also to help repair environmental damage caused by more than a century of heavy water extraction.

Evidence discussed in the MDBA’s discussion paper, along with independent scientific research, suggests that returning water to the environment has delivered some improvements in certain rivers. However, many important ecosystems across the Basin are still in poor condition.

This includes **floodplain wetlands, the Coorong and Lower Lakes, native fish and bird populations, and parts of the northern Basin such as the Barwon-Darling system**. In some cases, environmental conditions appear to be **stagnating or worsening**.

**EJA’s legal experts are concerned that current water limits and management arrangements are insufficient to protect and restore the Basin’s ecosystems**. We also note that engineering projects cannot replace the need for natural flows in rivers and

wetlands. SDL's must be set at levels that ensure enough water remains in the system to support healthy ecosystems.

If you share these concerns, our recommendations are outlined below.

It's valuable to share your perspective on the health of the Basin in your submission. This might include your experiences, observations, knowledge, data or research, or simply why a healthy Basin matters to you. You can also share examples of efforts to protect or restore these ecosystems.

## Recommendations:

### The MDBA should:

1. **Increase water recovery for the environment**, with a high level of reliability.
2. **Recalculate and re-set SDLs transparently** so that they ensure protection and repair of Basin ecosystems with a degree of confidence.
3. **Strengthen water management across the Basin**, including for areas such as floodplain wetlands, the rivers and wetlands of the northern Basin, the Coorong, and declining fish and bird populations.

# 4

## Water justice for Traditional Owners

### Overview

Healthy rivers, wetlands and floodplains are central to **First Nations peoples' connection to Country across the Murray-Darling Basin**. More than **50 First Nations** live across the Basin, each with distinct cultures and responsibilities to care for their lands and waters.

For many communities, caring for Country includes caring for rivers and wetlands. Protecting and restoring these waters supports **culture, wellbeing and the continuation of knowledge and traditions**.

However, the Basin Plan has been criticised for **not adequately recognising First Nations rights and authority in water management**. Many First Nations organisations say their involvement in decisions has often been limited.

At the same time, **First Nations leadership and advocacy in Basin water governance has grown strongly in recent decades**, with many communities calling for greater recognition of cultural water and stronger roles in decisions affecting their Country.

If you share these concerns, our recommendations are outlined below.

## Recommendation:

The Basin Plan Review should recognise and support First Nations water rights in line with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), by:

1. Requiring decision-makers to consult in order to obtain the free, prior and informed consent of First Nations peoples on water management and key decisions affecting Country.
2. Strengthening the legal status of First Nations rights and interests in water, including water supporting key cultural obligations (cultural water).
3. Supporting First Nations leadership and decision-making in how water is managed on Country.