

Murray-Darling Basin



The Murray–Darling Basin is Australia’s food bowl. It includes our three longest rivers and spans from Queensland to South Australia. It has a population of approximately 2 million people and supports much of Australia’s agriculture and agricultural exports.

However, the Murray-Darling Basin system is currently under substantial stress due to massive over-allocation of water, drought, climate change, and the impacts of resource extraction¹. Water flows at the Murray mouth have declined by 60%, and the river often only reaches the sea now due to dredging. Urgent action is required to protect this vital natural resource.

The Greens propose that:

- The Murray-Darling Basin Authority must be a properly independent national authority that acts without needing the agreement of the states, with powers to monitor and enforce compliance.
- The Murray-Darling Basin Plan should be released immediately and come into effect as soon as possible.
- The Murray-Darling Basin must be managed according to the best available science.
- Land and Water Australia is reinstated to conduct research and monitoring of the Basin.
- The Basin Plan must be continually revised in accordance with advances in scientific understanding.
- The Basin Plan must be informed by consultation with Basin communities, including indigenous communities, to ensure a strategic planning approach and the delivery of cultural flows and indigenous water rights.
- Establish a national register of foreign ownership of land and water licences.
- Investigate measures for the Foreign Investment Review Board to consider whether purchases of agricultural land and water resources are in the national interest, regardless of the value of those purchases.

Murray-Darling Basin



Background

Limitations of the present approach

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) is in the process of drafting the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, the release of which has recently been delayed until after the federal election. The Plan will set a sustainable limit on water diversions from the Basin and will make recommendations about how much water should be extracted from each river valley. However, this approach has serious limitations:

- The states must agree to these recommendations before they have any effect, and this is far from guaranteed given the pressure they will come under from agriculture and industry seeking to extract more water from the system;
- Even if the states agree, the Authority has no power to monitor and enforce their compliance;
- The Basin Plan will not take effect until the States' existing Water Resource Plans (i.e. the Plans that have resulted in the present degraded condition of the Basin) expire, which will be in 2014 in most cases, and 2019 for Victoria.

The need for ongoing monitoring, research and revision of the Plan – Reinstate Land and Water Australia

It is important that the Plan is finalised and implemented as quickly as possible given the dire state of the Basin. However, the Plan must also be based on a current, comprehensive, scientific understanding of the Basin. There are many gaps in our knowledge: such as the key sites in the riverine landscape that are essential to the health of different species, floodplains that must remain free of development to ensure essential nutrients can be brought back into the system to support biodiversity, and so on.

There must be a clear plan for ongoing research and monitoring and revision of the Plan. Such research has been sadly lacking since the Government axed Land and Water Australia – the former statutory research and development organisation tasked with investigating the sustainable use of our agricultural land. The Greens will re-instate Land and Water Australia at a cost of \$13 mil per annum to co-ordinate and conduct ongoing research into the Basin, alongside its other important functions.

Murray-Darling Basin



Foreign ownership of agricultural land and water resources

At present, the Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) scrutinises all proposed purchases of residential real estate by foreign companies. However, similar scrutiny is not brought to bear upon proposed foreign ownership of agricultural land or water resources unless their value exceeds \$231 million or \$1004 million for US investors under the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement. Currently, there is no record of foreign ownership of these vital resources.

The Greens believe water should be managed in the national interest. In this time of global food insecurity, a situation which becomes increasingly precarious as climate change advances, a more considered approach is warranted. The Greens will establish a national register of foreign ownership of these resources to ensure transparency and openness about land and water purchasing in Australia. The Greens want to see the role of the FIRB extended to scrutinise all proposed new acquisitions to determine whether they serve the national interest. The Foreign Acquisitions and Takeovers Act 1975 should be amended to give the FIRB an oversight role.

The significance of the Lower Lakes and the Coorong

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan must ensure adequate flows to the Lower Lakes and the Coorong. This area is recognised as internationally significant wetlands that Australia is obliged to protect under the Ramsar Convention. It incorporates 23 different wetland types and supports many species of waterbirds and native fish. The health of the Lower Lakes, Coorong and Murray Mouth are critical to the health of the entire river system. Unless adequate flows reach the end of the system and empty into the sea, the river system can not 'flush' and its health is compromised all the way up.

¹ For more on this, see the Greens' policy initiatives on coal seam gas extraction and mining on farmland.