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How good is the Murray-Darling Basin Plan deal?

The Coalition Government and the Labor Opposition are to be congratulated for the bipartisan agreement that saw the 605 GL Sustainable Diversion Limit adjustment package pass Parliament on Wednesday, 9 May, and will also see the Northern Basin Amendments passed in a few weeks.

The [Basin Plan agreement](#) is wide-ranging and impressive. It binds all jurisdictions responsible for Basin Plan implementation together through mutual obligations and provides a clear roadmap to achieve the triple bottom line outcomes we're all driving towards. But, as always with such deals, the outcomes will rely on how well all parties adhere to the roadmap's route.

As a retiring member of the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) Board I have spent nine years steering the Basin Plan through development, adoption and onward to implementation. It is a good time to leave. This deal has cut through state issues and turbo-charges many aspects of the Plan's implementation that have dawdled rather than sprinted to the line.

Four aspects of the deal are particularly pleasing to me.

The first, is a long overdue focus on improved outcomes for indigenous people. Importantly the agreement enables indigenous groups to acquire water entitlements for both cultural and economic use and provides \$40 million to turn the dream into a reality. The benefits of this deal for indigenous water rights have been covered in [The Conversation by Sue Jackson](#).

The second, is the strengthening of the Sustainable Diversion Limit adjustment mechanism. The mechanism comprises of 36 projects that change how the river is managed and build infrastructure for the environment so the environmental outcomes required under the Basin Plan can be delivered with less water.

These projects, proposed by the states and assessed by the MDBA, provide an offset of 605 GL of environmental water that will stay in the consumptive pool. The mechanism means that the Basin Plan continues to deliver the benefits of 2750GL while recovering 2145GL.

Just like the rivers in the Murray–Darling Basin, these projects cannot be looked at in isolation. Some are larger and will deliver greater offsets, however the quantum will depend on how well all projects are integrated together. I am please the MDBA will continue to play a role in ensuring the projects stay on track to deliver the outcomes we know they can achieve.

When talking about the SDL adjustment projects I need to acknowledge the considerable concerns I've heard about the lack of detail and consultation up until this point. My assessment of the process is that the Basin states, who are responsible for the development of these projects, recognise they can do better. We have until June 2024 to complete the projects and there is a safety net built in. If the modelled 605 GL benefits are not achieved, the Australian Government will need to recover any shortfall.

The third aspect of the landmark agreement links funding for the SDL projects to states' participation in recovering 450 GL of water for the environment. This creates a great opportunity to get the best out of both mechanisms.

The Basin Plan says we need to recover the equivalent of 3,200 GL for the environment. This means that along with the SDL adjustment another 450 GL needs to be recovered over and above the initial 2,750 GL.

This additional 450 GL was agreed by all Basin states and the Australian Parliament in 2012 when the Basin Plan came into law. There is \$1.5 billion in the Water for the Environment Special Account to fund irrigation efficiency measures while delivering positive or neutral effects for communities. It is good to see that states' access to Australian Government funds will hinge on their ability *'to demonstrate their full cooperation with the delivery of efficiency measures as defined under the Basin Plan'*.

This welcome move will act as a circuit breaker where in the past jurisdictions have hit an impasse. That is not to say the funding link will be a silver bullet. The Basin Plan is a complex and important water reform. It is important that communities are involved and that where pockets of resistance are evident this resistance is worked through and not used by vested interested as a blocker to progress.

This brings me to the fourth aspect of the deal that I believe can be a game changer. Constraints. These are things that reduce the ability of environmental water managers to run the river systems as efficiently as possible. They include physical constraints such as low lying bridges and river crossing, restricted outflows from dams, and inundation of private land. They also include operational constraints such as operating rules for the rivers, irrigation water and environmental water.

Some important constraints projects are included in the 36 SDL adjustment projects. The measures outlined in the agreement will accelerate their implementation. However, the largest constraint to the Basin Plan achieving its expected environmental outcomes is our inability to get environmental water over the bank and onto floodplain wetlands and forests. This is particularly relevant in the Goulburn River system, where many important environmental assets are being starved of water and their condition is degrading.

I would encourage communities to work through issues of concern in a constructive way. With \$1.5 billion in funding available for SDL adjustment projects there is a real opportunity to make headway on this critical part of the plan. Relaxing constraints on the rivers so environmental water managers can better mimic the sort of flows nature needs will have local ecological benefits as well as benefits throughout the system. If we can work together to get common sense outcomes here we will make a great leap forward in our ability to achieve Basin Plan aims. It can work. For example, in the Murray between Hume and Yarrawonga, easements have been negotiated to allow managed environmental flows to inundate private land at times.

This Basin Plan agreement certainly takes the Basin Plan up a gear. It addresses a number of issues that had threatened to derail the Plan's successful implementation. It will rank as a vital circuit breaker in the history of this major water reform.

And we have achieved much in getting to this point. More than 2100 GL of water is now held by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder and has been used in more than 750 events to support birds, fish and vegetation.

That said, there is still much to be done to ensure the components of the agreement are successfully implemented and not watered down. The agreement shows the critical importance of Australian Government's leadership and involvement in water management in the Murray–Darling Basin, through the MDBA, the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources and the Department of the Environment and Energy.

The role of the MDBA, the independent, expertise-based statutory authority responsible for Basin Plan implementation, has never been more important as we look to build on the momentum this agreement has generated. In leaving the authority board I urge the MDBA to continue as the impartial umpire so we can achieve a sustainable Basin for future generations.