
Why we can't just focus on the Basin Plan

With all the talk about the Murray Darling Basin Plan, it would be easy to think that it is the cause of all troubles. However, we all must remember that the Basin Plan is just one of many policies that governs water management in the Basin.

The Basin Plan is not the plan for how the Basin is governed.

It is a specific plan to reduce the amount of water diverted from rivers to a Sustainable Diversion Limit. A lengthy process of reforms, culminating in the Basin Plan, has reduced the amount of water irrigation farmers can use by 28%. That has had devastating impacts for our river communities, and food and fibre production in the Basin.

But as an industry, we have to remember that from our industries point of view, **the Basin Plan is now pretty much complete**. Water recovery is complete in nearly every valley. We are now complying with Sustainable Diversion Limits. The irrigation industry has done our fair share - now the remainder of the lifting is up to the Basin Governments through implementing projects. Why are we calling for them to get off easy, when our industry has done all the hard work and deserves to see the outcomes delivered?

There is no point calling for the Basin Plan to go away, because that won't reverse history. There is also no point calling for the Basin Plan to go away in order to resolve a number of other (very critical and real) issues which... **are not even contained in the Basin Plan**.

For example, some of the major concerns our irrigation farmers are voicing include:

- **Zero allocation to farmers when the Murray is full** – this is a major issue, and it is simply devastating for our farmers to watch the Murray flow by whilst having 0% allocations – but allocations are determined in State water allocation policies (not the Basin Plan).
- **Sharing water between states (e.g. South Australia) to ensure that drought impacts are shared fairly**: this is a very real issue that requires investigating so specific areas (such as the Murray) don't have to carry more than their fair share of the burden – but it is in the *Murray-Darling Agreement* (not the Basin Plan) which pre-dates the Basin Plan.
- **High prices of water** – it is devastating to see that exceptionally high prices of water are making farming simply unviable for many farmers. But the water market also pre-dates the Basin Plan, and the issues with the water market wouldn't go away even if the Basin Plan went away.

It seems that at the moment, all the finger pointing is towards the Basin Plan. But – as we explain in more detail [\[HERE\]](#) – the Basin Plan isn't the cause of all the troubles, and even if it were to go away, our farmers would not get any more water, in fact they would probably get much less (as buybacks would be required).

If we let all the focus fall on the Basin Plan, when we know that isn't where our troubles now are, we will get distracted from actually fixing the real issues and seeing better outcomes.

The complexity of water management makes it exceptionally difficult for people to know where to point their fingers. So what do we do, as one industry, to get to the bottom of this complexity and identify what needs fixing to get better outcomes for our sector?

At times like these, we need to channel our frustrations and anger, towards informed and constructive responses. **The situation is critical, and that is why we must remain focused on the critical issues.** NSWIC encourages our irrigation farmers who wish to participate in advocacy for our sector to focus on the below key aspects (as we believe these will achieve much better outcomes for our farmers than the current Can the Plan focus):

1. **Amend the Murray-Darling Agreement** – seek an investigation into how drought risk and burden is shared between states, and how sharing arrangements impact on state water allocations and deliverability.
2. **Government to do their heavy lifting under the Basin Plan properly so farmers don't have to do any more** – ensure government do their fair share (by implementing the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism Projects), but allowing flexibility and adaptability to get these projects right, supported by local communities, and get them in place – to avoid more buy-backs.
3. **Remove impediments to underusage so every drop for farmers can be used by farmers** – support state governments doing an investigation into underusage so farmers are using up to the Sustainable Diversion Limit, and processes are in place if they do not (e.g. if SDL credits accumulate).
4. **Make the most of the Inspector-General** – with investigative powers akin to a Royal Commission – our industry should be collaborating positively to see any concerns of maladministration referred to this statutory authority for action.
5. **See complementary measures delivered by Government** – so we can see actual environmental benefits, and improved ecological conditions, without the need for more water to be taken off farmers in the future.

NSWIC is finalising a detailed roadmap to getting better outcomes for irrigation farmers in the Basin. The Roadmap is not specific to any one piece of legislation, it is no quick-fix, but it is a sensible, logical and informed process to work towards a **secure, sustainable and productive** Murray Darling Basin.

NSWIC will continue identifying critical issues which we believe our industry should be advocating for, and publish them on our website as new information comes to hand. We encourage people to keep an eye on our Action Statement [HERE] to stay on top of where all the complex moving parts are up to.