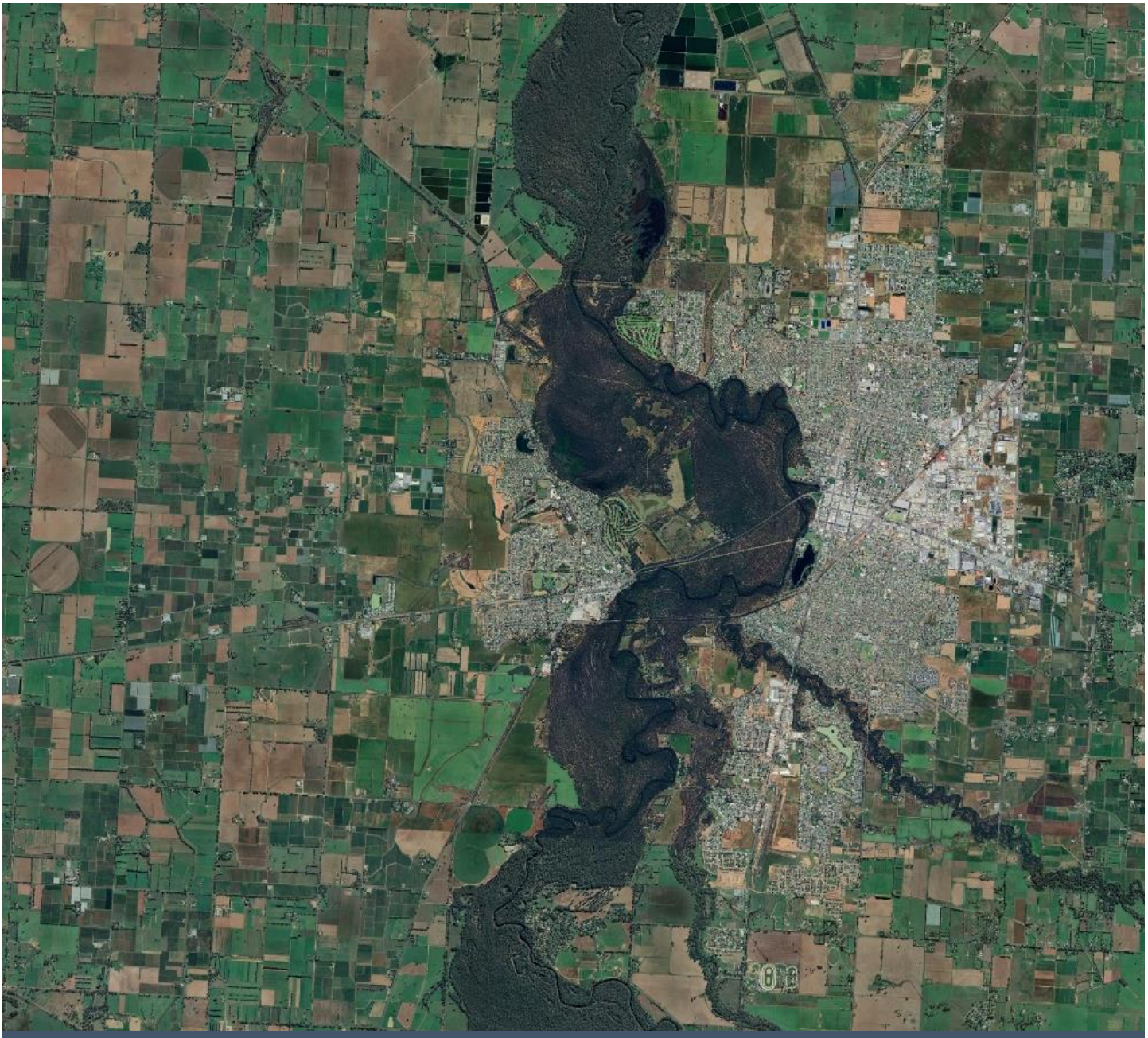

Murray-Darling Basin Plan: Implementation Review 2023

Submission to Australian Government Productivity Commission review - July 2023

COMMITTEE FOR GREATER SHEPPARTON

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF TRADITIONAL OWNERS

We acknowledge the Yorta Yorta peoples of the land which now comprises Greater Shepparton and we pay our respects to their tribal elders, we celebrate their continuing culture, and we acknowledge the memory of their ancestors.

Report cover image source: https://nationalmap.gov.au/

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Committee for Greater Shepparton (C4GS) welcomes the Productivity Commission's Murray-Darling Basin implementation review 2023 and the opportunity it provides to objectively review the status and next steps at a critical point in the delivery of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

C4GS is a member funded not-for-profit organisation with a membership that includes almost 120 of Greater Shepparton's businesses, agencies and not for profit organisations. The Committee seeks to provide an informed, constructive, and influential voice for the Greater Shepparton region to all levels of government and decision makers and in doing so to support our region to advance the aspirations and prosperity of our community.

C4GS is a member of the Goulburn-Murray Irrigation District (GMID) Water Leadership Forum. In partnership with the Forum, C4GS CEO and Forum co-chairs David McKenzie and Suzanna Sheed presented to the Productivity Commission during the Shepparton consultation sessions. We found the opportunity valuable in outlining our position and to understanding the purpose and scope of the current consultation program.

C4GS's submission outlines our responses to many but not all matters detailed in the *Call for submissions* document. Our approach is predicated on four key principles:

- No further reduction of the consumptive pool,
- Optimising outcomes for the environment, including the many key sites across our region, by enabling delivery at the right time, to the right location and for the right period, in all seasons and conditions,
- Leveraging the maturing of water markets and community understanding, and
- Building on the advances in science, engineering and technology that have occurred over the life of the Plan, and draw on these to improve delivery and navigate the challenges that are inevitable in the latter stages of a plan of this scale and ambition.

Our submission also recognises that Victoria and in particular Greater Shepparton has been at the centre of pandemic disruptions and in late 2022 experienced some of the largest and prolonged flooding in recent history. Despite these challenges our region has continued to deliver in good faith against the Plan's targets and as detailed in our submission, Victoria has:

- Exceeded water recovery targets,
- Is able to deliver 98% of project outcomes by December 2026, and
- Has delivered more than two-thirds of all water recovered against the Efficiency Measures target (additional 450GL).

Last week the Federal Government confirmed its intention to extend the timelines for delivery of the Plan which is consistent with recommendations arising from the Productivity Commission review in 2018. This is a prudent response that creates a more appropriate pathway to lock in the positive legacy of the Plan.

It is our view that by prioritising a more agile and practical approach that's focused on ensuring water can be delivered where and when its needed, the Plan will achieve greater benefits in all years and under all climate scenarios, thereby ensuring the Plan's legacy reflects genuine, sustained benefits for the environment and the Australian community.

Linda Nieuwenhuizen
CEO
Committee for Greater Shepparton

July 2023

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ABOUT GREATER SHEPPARTON

Greater Shepparton is the largest city on Victoria's largest river, the Goulburn River. Greater Shepparton is also the southern gateway into the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District (GMID) and north through Australia's primary production corridor.

From its origins as a punt crossing between the northern Victorian goldfields, Greater Shepparton has grown to become one of eastern Australia's largest and most dynamic primary production, value-adding and logistics centres.

Primary production

The Greater Shepparton region produces more than 40 agricultural commodities including highly perishable products and supermarket staples.

Greater Shepparton is Australia's second largest dairy production region accounting for 20% of Victoria's milk production worth more than $2 billion. More than 40% of this production is exported and a further 25% is supplied into the NSW and Queensland markets where local supply is insufficient.

The region grows more than 80% of Australia's pome and stone fruit that is destined for markets across Australia and into premium export markets across Asia, the Americas, and Europe.

The region continues to attract significant investment in traditional livestock, dairy and horticulture sectors as well as emerging sectors such as medicinal cannabis, almonds, and glass house hydroponics.

The region's fertiliser, seed, genetics, and plant-breeding industries are estimated to exceed $2 billion in value.

Freight and logistics hub

More than a quarter of Victoria's heavy vehicles are registered in Shepparton and the region has seen more than $100 million of investment in warehousing and storage. From highly sophisticated climate-controlled facilities with autonomous stock placement and retrieval, to bulk storage of commodities from across the MDB's primary production corridor, the region plays a key role in enabling the efficient and rapid release of product to domestic and export markets and into value-adding processes.

This growth builds on Greater Shepparton's location as a critical intersection on the national freight network that runs like a spine through Australia's primary production heartland – from the Darling Downs and Brisbane through NSW and Victoria to the Port of Melbourne - Australia's busiest container port. Shepparton also provides direct access to Adelaide and linkages across the Riverina and northern Victoria. These freight routes are vital to the movement of production out of, as well as the safe and efficient movement of inputs into Australia's primary production regions.

Manufacturing and value-adding centre

The Greater Shepparton region is home to almost 20% of regional Victoria's manufacturing capacity. Annual production is valued at more than $4.6 billion with more than 40 local food and fibre manufacturing and processing sites that range from niche operators to iconic Australian brands and world leading companies such as Noumi, SPC, Unilever, Bega, Saputo, and Campbells.

Built on irrigation.

The Goulburn and Murray rivers are the major sources of supply into the GMID. The design of reliable water entitlements has been the catalyst for intense ag industries and the concentration of downstream value adding industry in the region.

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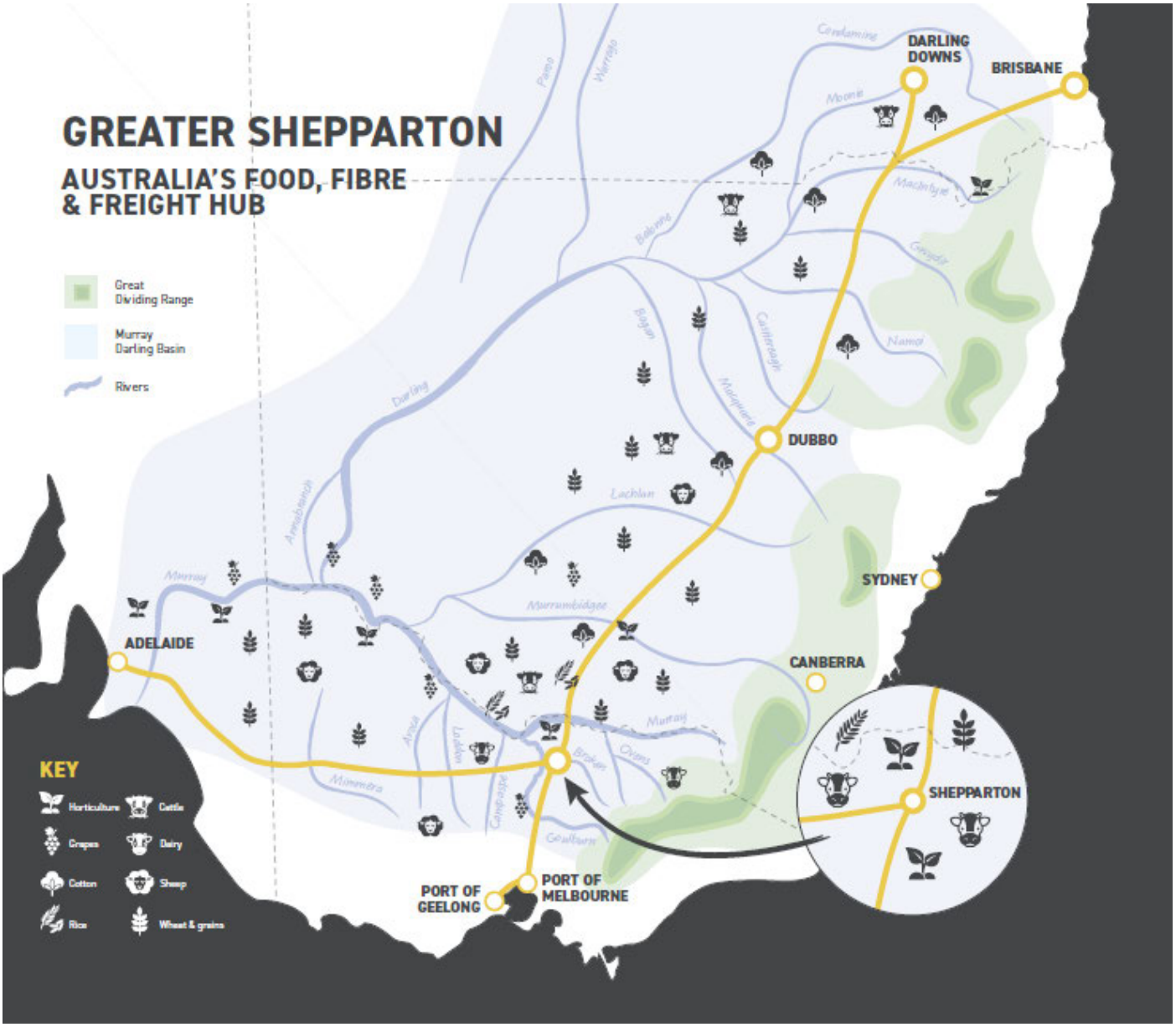
Most water users and more than 20 towns source their water from the extensive channel network. With channels best suited to larger volume water delivery, any decrease in water delivery through the system triggers significant operational challenges and shifts the burden onto fewer and fewer residents and users – including regional towns. For this reason, the region is extremely vulnerable to water entitlements relocated from the channel network to rivers.



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RESETTING THE BALANCE

The fundamental goal of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan is to provide the water resources and delivery infrastructure to deliver water where, when, for the right length of time and at the right volumes to achieve positive outcomes for the many valued environmental sites along the Murray-Darling river system. This goal recognises that water on its own is not enough to sustain the health of the system and achieve environmental outcomes.

PROGRESS

Water recovery has exceeded the agreed, combined water recovery target.

At 31 May 2023[1], 2107.4 GL/y of surface water has been recovered – this is more than the target of 2075GL/y. The Plan is expected to deliver a further 46 GL/y because each individual component that make up the target must deliver their minimum commitment – projects that exceed the target do not offset under-recovery by other components. A buyback program targeting the catchments that have not achieved their individual targets closed on 19 May and is expected to secure the shortfall. As a result, the Plan is on track to exceed the target.

98% of Victoria's water recovery and delivery (supply and constraints) targets could be delivered with a two-year extension to 2026.

Of the MDB Plan's basin wide target (2750GL) – Victoria will deliver 88% of its obligations by June 2024 and 98% could be achieved with an extension of the deadline to December 2026.

Victoria continues to operate in good faith as the single largest contributor to the Efficiency Measures target (additional 450GL) that was *'included in the Basin Plan on the condition that there would be neutral or positive socio-economic impacts from recovering this water*[2]*.*

Victoria has contracted 68% of the water recovered to date against this contentious target which reinforces Victoria's and Victorian communities' commitment to the Plan and to acting in good faith to deliver these additional water resources where they meet the threshold test of neutral or positive socio-economic impacts.

Australian consumers will face avoidable, unnecessary, and permanent cost of living increases if further volumes of water are removed.

Further reductions in water available for irrigation in Australia's primary production regions will increase water prices to levels that are not viable for production of everyday consumer items including milk, meat, grains, apples, potatoes, vegetables, and oranges. The irrigated agriculture that continues will shift to higher value commodities – not the staples Australian families and consumers rely on.

[1] https://www.dcceew.gov.au/water/policy/mdb/progress-recovery
[2] https://www.water.vic.gov.au/murray-darling-basin-plan/what-is-the-murray-darling-basin-plan/additional-water-recovery'

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Extend deadlines to recognise the impact of the pandemic and October 2022 floods on project works, supply chains and communities.

- Reactivate previously agreed projects that have been halted because their works cannot be completed by the June 2024 deadline.
- Extend delivery deadlines for all projects and works to allow for the disruptions to supply chains, workforce, seasonal access and works delivery caused by the pandemic and 2022 floods.
- Adopt reasonable timelines for the delivery of each project, rather than the blanket approach to all projects.

Victorian Water Minister Harriet Shing has halted work on four Murray floodplain restoration projects that promised to deliver 58 gigalitres of environmental water efficiency gains towards the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Covid restrictions and other delays have meant Victoria has fallen way behind on delivering all nine projects, worth 72.5GL in efficiency gains, which under a $320 million funding agreement with the federal government must be delivered by June 30, 2024.

Weekly Times, 19 April 2023

COVID's impact on federal and state government policies and the disruption of international and domestic workforce and supply chains is widely recognised as the primary cause for extensive delays to a wide range of public and private infrastructure projects across Australia. The timelines for projects large and small have been revised to account for these impacts, however this logic has not been applied to the delivery of the Basin Plan.

Greater Shepparton is a critical provider of services and supplies for projects across northern Victoria and especially within the Goulburn-Murray Irrigation District (GMID). It is home to a quarter of Victoria's heavy vehicles (trucks), almost 20% of regional Victoria's manufacturing and, after food manufacturing, its second largest manufacturing export is fabricated steel. The region is home to key expertise in water management, engineering, design, and construction.

Greater Shepparton capacity to support project delivery was severely impacted by the pandemic as the city experienced the longest 'lockdown' of any regional centre in Australia, and at one stage approximately a third of the city's population was in isolation. The impact on industry, supply chains and works delivery across northern Victorian and southern NSW was significant and prolonged – especially for projects that are constrained by seasonal access.

After a wetter than usual 2022 that frustrated works delivery, the October 2022 floods impacted communities and businesses across northern Victoria. Many businesses are reporting ongoing delays to works, supplies and workforce availability well into 2023. The floods have compounded difficulties with access to sites and works completion.

It is entirely reasonable, prudent, and appropriate for timelines to be adjusted – especially as we seek to ensure the best value from available government funding and resources. Moreover, Victoria continues to deliver against all aspects of the Plan in good faith – and the community rightly expect the same in return.

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Extend the commitment to best available science to best available technology, engineering, and economics.

- Allow all jurisdictions to review the lists of projects proposed over the life of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan to confirm projects that may now have access to the technology, skills, and capabilities to enable their efficient and effective delivery.

15 years ago, iPad, Uber, commercial drones, and Netflix didn't exist. Over the same period the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and the governments, departments, agencies, businesses, and communities involved in its delivery have experienced and, in many cases, driven an equivalent evolution in technology, knowledge, engineering, and design as well as community appetite and acceptance.

In contrast the Murray-Darling Basin Plan has been plagued by prescriptive project and delivery requirements that have unfairly constrained the adaptation and use of the project's growing body of knowledge to inform the selection, design, and delivery of projects.

This evolution could enable the delivery of initiatives that were previously not deemed feasible or possible and could also open the door for new approaches including co-design. Allowing new projects to be switched in, and others to be switched out, redesigned, or updated are all examples of the Plan applying the best available science.

The key impediment to this approach is the arbitrary timelines for delivery. It is recommended that reasonable timelines be applied to the delivery of each project, rather than the blanket approach to all projects.

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BASIN MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

The Productivity Commission's *Call for Submissions* recognises that 'it is not possible to assess the effectiveness of the implementation of water resource plans …that have only been in place for a couple of years.'

PROGRESS

All 13 water resource plans in Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, and the Australian Capital Territory remain accredited and in operation[3].

Consistent with Victoria's commitment to the Plan, all water resource plans have been developed, assessed by the MDBA, and accredited by the Australian Government Minister for Water.

Supply measures improve river management in all years and climate scenarios.

River managers including MDBA continue to support delivery of supply measures because of their immediate benefits to system management and environmental water delivery, and the increased flexibility they will provide in the system to meet future challenges brought on by climate change.

Reduced volumes through the channel network jeopardise quality and supply of critical human water needs.

Increasing water recovery (buybacks) as a substitute for water delivery works will further reduce the volumes of water available to be delivered via the GMID channel network to water users including many towns, processors and manufacturers and communities. There is already evidence that reduced flows reduce system efficiency, a permanent reduction risks taking flows below a viable threshold and would jeopardise the quality and supply of water for critical human needs.

Optimising environmental outcomes requires collaboration with other water users and infrastructure operators.

Environmental flows need to reach and be maintained at target sites to trigger the desired environmental outcomes. Many of these sites require additional flows to push water out to the sites. Large natural flood events such as October 2022 will reach the sites, however between these events water deliveries will require massive, continuous flows that impact on upstream and downstream communities, industry and have triggered unintended environmental damage such as bank gouging. Works that allow precise delivery, and partnerships with other water users and water managers to 'piggyback' on flows in the system will allow water managers to reach more sites, more effectively and minimise unintended consequences for river health, communities and other water and land users.

[3] https://www.mdba.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/054-17652-mid-year-report-card-2023-web_3.pdf

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Environmental water management outcomes and impacts must be measured along the entire system.

Greater Shepparton sits within the GMID that is serviced by a network that integrates man-made channels with natural water ways and rivers. Our natural water ways are the more vulnerable components of the system with examples of bank gouging and similar unintended impacts resulting from increased environmental flows for the extended periods required to trigger outcomes.

The legacy of the Plan depends on being able to optimise the movement of this water through the system and to key sites for years to come – but to do this in ways that do not damage the many natural waterways.

Evaluate water recovery options against their full costs and benefits.

Across the basin, regions have evolved in response to the supply and reliability of their water resources. The design of Victoria's reliable water entitlements and the extensive channel delivery network has been the catalyst for intense agriculture, a network of local towns and the concentration of downstream value-adding industries. These factors vary significantly across the Basin.

Most water users and more than 20 towns source their water from the extensive channel network of the GMID. Channel performance and efficiency is best suited to larger-volume water delivery – In 21/22 GMW delivered 1.053GL with a system efficiency of 86.2%, in contrast 0.595GL was delivered in 2019/20 and system efficiency dropped to only 77.0%.[4]

The threat of water buybacks replacing works means the channel network is approaching a threshold where any further decrease in water transferred through the system will trigger significant operational challenges. Affordability, efficiency, and the supply to regional towns are significant concerns – and will be critical during periods of low water availability. The costs of offsetting these impacts should be included in the evaluation of options such as buybacks.

Prioritise outcomes over volumes.

- Buybacks and similar volume-only water recovery tools do not deliver equivalent benefits to water delivery projects.

The recent MDB consultation sessions provided further insight into the formulas and calculations that convert the various projects to a quantified ML measure. Unfortunately, this approach implies an equivalency across the projects and options including buybacks that is misleading and counterproductive to the genuine goals of the Plan.

There is a significant difference between a ML of entitlement held in a storage, and a ML delivered at the right time, to the right location, and allowed to 'sit in the landscape' for the right period. Whether it's an irrigator 'tickling the toes' of a crop, or a planned environmental watering that remains for long enough to trigger breeding and ecological cycles, time and timing are critical to achieving the full suite of benefits from available water resources.

Prioritise water delivery over water recovery.

- The works, measures and infrastructure that can enable environmental water to be delivered where, when and for as long as it is required must be prioritised and operational - before further volume-only recovery initiatives (e.g., buybacks) are contemplated.

[4] https://www.g-mwater.com.au/downloads/gmw/Annual_Reports/20220921_GMW_Annual_Report_2022.pdf

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With supply chain and workforce challenges continuing, there are genuine challenges to moving forward on all fronts simultaneously. In addition to extending project delivery timelines to offset these issues, it is recommended the Plan prioritise projects that enable the delivery of water to target sites, over projects that will only recovery additional water.

This approach recognises that delivery of water secures benefits in every season. In contrast water entitlements provide access to water in line with seasonal allocations but do not guarantee 100% allocation and that the water can be delivered to the locations where it needed.

Enable co-design of partnership initiatives.

- As the Plan has matured, so has the knowledge and experience of communities and interests impacted by its delivery. A decade on, there is genuine potential to co-design water access and delivery arrangements with willing participants that can achieve multiple benefits for multiple users and have a significant positive impact on the final legacy of a much-contested Plan.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan's purpose is to restore a healthier balance among a range of users including the environment, industry, and communities. Unfortunately, it is perceived as forcing choices between these users, and this is exacerbated by the lack of flexibility to co-design water delivery arrangements in partnership with landowners, local communities, infrastructure operators and other interests.

There are many examples of major projects 'blowing out' in the final stages of their delivery because the easy stages have been delivered and the more difficult final stages often require much greater investment in community acceptance, technical design, and time. Leveraging the past 10 years of the Plan and tapping into a more mature community understanding could provide a more realistic pathway to success and realisation of the Plan's goals. It is also an approach that applies the disputed principal of 'willing sellers' to the more positive concept of 'willing partners', with the latter much more likely to foster community confidence and trust.

Examples include co-design of watering regimes for key assets – especially where the water delivery and targeted location can be enhanced using existing public and private infrastructure.

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THE FUTURE OF THE BASIN PLAN

Climate change

Victoria's well established water sharing rules are built on relatively conservative principles – for example:

- Water allocations are determined based on water in and on its way into the storages and systems – and progressively adjusted over the course of the season if and when more resources are confirmed.
- Water users are provided with water outlooks that reflect possible outcomes under a range of scenarios (Very dry through to very wet).

As a result, water availability in each season is carefully calibrated to the seasonal conditions in each season and over time.

The MDB's water delivery network and infrastructure does not have the same flexibility. For this reason, priority must be given to works and measures that improve this flexibility and enable targeted water delivery in every season and climate scenario.

Aboriginal nations in the basin

While we do not seek to speak on behalf of the many Aboriginal nations, many cultural watering plans place great emphasis on being able to deliver water precisely where it is needed, when it is needed and for the length of time it is needed.

Community engagement

As outlined earlier in this submission, irrigators and local communities have actively contributed to. successfully achieving the water recovery targets.

In contrast, Murray-Darling Basin communities and water users including irrigators have little control over the delivery of the supply and efficiency measures projects or the preparation of water resource plans - but they carry the risk and will bear the consequences of non-delivery.

These risks are further complicated in northern Victoria by the integrated water systems and markets either side of the river. Responses such as buybacks that seek to correct the non-delivery in the one state will impact states that have and continue to meet their obligations.

In this context the ongoing consultation with communities that is often framed or limited to a local, state or even system level is inconsistent with the community's ability to impact the outcomes and has progressively contributed to the ongoing sense of futility and fatigue.

Helping Communities adjust

The MDB Plan has many parallels with the closure of fossil fuel energy generation in towns across regional Australia. The similarities include:

- The loss of high-value professional and skilled technical roles across the supply chain and their economic and social impact in regional communities
- Cost increases for consumers of essential products and services (e.g., everyday food and fibre staples),
- Downstream and upstream impacts on employment and industry in metropolitan and regional centres, and
- The loss of a way of life that is knitted into regional and suburban communities' identity and success.

The stark difference is that fossil fuel communities have enjoyed considerably greater financial support, extended horizons to plan and move through transition, and certainty regarding when and how the transition will take effect.

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In comparative terms, therefore, government support to the Latrobe Valley in response to the Hazelwood Power Station closure is approximately ten times that provided to GMID communities in response to direct job losses associated with the implementation of the Basin Plan.[5]

Individual payments to farmers via water buybacks are equivalent to the redundancy payments received by individual employees. These payments in no way compensate the broader community and they do not provide resources to support identifying, incubating, and growing new industries and employment, adjusting service infrastructure (for example replacing channel supply) and planning for the economic and social needs of a different future. In fact, anecdotal reports indicate only a portion of the buyback funds are spent locally as recipients seek alternate employment and opportunities outside the region.

In the Latrobe Valley, Gladstone and the Hunter, governments have never doubted the additional funding and time required to support the entire region's transition – including the social, economic, and broader community.

It is estimated water buybacks to secure the remaining balance of 750GL would cost Australian taxpayers at least $6 billion. However, this does not recognise the broader transition funding that is required to ensure MDB communities receive support equivalent to that enjoyed by communities and towns impacted by the transition away from fossil fuels.

Murray–Darling Basin Economic Development Program

The MDBED program has provided almost $73 million of funding for 132 projects across the entire basin – from Queensland to South Australia. Both the funding and the individual projects have delivered valuable outcomes for communities across the basin however the competitive application process and time constrained delivery with no certainty of future funding streams is at odds with a sustained strategic program to support adjustment by individuals, industry, and communities in the basin over time.

C4GS received a significant grant to support delivery of the Community Connector Program that supports professionals to relocate to Greater Shepparton and to rapidly establish roots within the local community. This program has supported more than 100 local businesses, attract more than 500 professionals (this number does not include partners and families) to relocate to Greater Shepparton since 2021 - with more than 3 out of 4 confirming the program positively influenced their decision to relocate and to stay in the region.

With average household spend in Greater Shepparton exceeding $108,000 pa[6], attracting, and retaining professionals and key workers is a significant economic contributor and directly addresses one of the key risks associated with the MDB Plan. Unfortunately, the short horizon for expending the grant undermined efforts to design and embed a sustainable funding model to support key worker attraction and retention in Greater Shepparton, and there is a real chance the program will lapse. This example reinforces the importance of a much longer and coordinated approach to identifying and directly addressing key risks of the Plan – that extend beyond the loss of water for irrigation.

[5] Essential Economics – Basin Plan Economic Impacts on the GMID and comparison with Hazelwood Power station closure, November 2016

[6] https://economy.id.com.au/shepparton/household-expenditure?BMID=20&sEndYear=2021

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Prioritise continuous, imbedded conversations.

Over the life of the Plan consultation has generally been time based with predetermined scope and exclusions. While being clear on what is on the table for discussion is a general rule for good consultation, repeated constrained consultation processes lose the opportunity for more fulsome trust-building conversations that explore and share knowledge and experiences. As more and more of the Plan's deliverables move beyond local communities' and irrigators' control, these conversations and discussions become even more important.

Engage with entire supply chains.

Shepparton is the gateway into the GMID, home to key Victorian rural water and resource management agencies, along with significant downstream processing and manufacturing industries that service and rely on produce from the MDB - and yet no MDBA or federal government water representatives or offices are located in Greater Shepparton. C4GS believes this is a missed opportunity to be part of community and conversations that extend well beyond immediate ag and farming to include the many and significant upstream and downstream supply chain implications of water policy in general, and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in particular.

As mentioned earlier in our submission, there has been significant growth in the understanding of the Plan and ways it could successfully be delivered in partnership with communities. As we move through the next stages of the Plan increased local presence coupled with open ongoing conversations can elicit opportunities and ways forward that would otherwise be unknown or overlooked.

Include full costs in evaluation of options.

With fossil fuel town transitions underway, they provide a model to better understand the true cost to communities and the effort and time required to design and support an effective transition. The extraction of further water from the consumptive pool on top of already reduced volumes poses an equivalent threat to the viability of regions, systems, and communities.

These equivalent costs and timelines should be added to the anticipated cost of buybacks to provide a genuine comparison between the various options available to complete the Plan.

The costs need to recognise the overall impact on consumers across Australia, infrastructure investments to address reduced flows and efficiency of the channel deliver networks, and the loss of high value professional employment and industries from regional areas– not simply the 'redundancy payment' to individual water entitlement owners.

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CONCLUSION

The Committee for Greater Shepparton welcomes the opportunity to share these high-level ideas outlined in our submission. We also welcome the opportunity to work with our members and wider community to further scope and define proposals that may emerge from the Productivity Commission's consultation process. Our breadth of membership provides a valuable insight into the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan on the full supply chain – that extends well beyond regional areas.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan is an ambitious undertaking that warrants genuine and continuous review to ensure it is learning and adapting to a changing landscape, communities and, importantly, changing knowledge and possibilities.

We look forward to future opportunities to discuss these proposals.

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