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Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council, 'Legislative and Governance Forum on the Murray-Darling Basin No. 2: Murray-Darling Basin water ministers meet in Canberra' (Communique, 29 June 2012)

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Legislative and Governance Forum on the Murray-Darling Basin No. 2

Murray-Darling Basin water ministers meet in Canberra

29 June 2012

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council met today in Canberra to consider the current draft Basin Plan and broader water management issues.

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The Ministerial Council comprises the Chair, the Hon Tony Burke MP (Commonwealth); the Hon Katrina Hodgkinson (New South Wales); the Hon Peter Walsh (Victoria); the Hon Paul Caica (South Australia); the Hon Andrew Cripps (Queensland) and Mr Simon Corbell (Australian Capital Territory).

Under the Water Act 2007, Basin Ministers are able to provide comments on the proposed Basin Plan to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (the Authority), specifying those areas of the draft Plan on which one or more of its members disagrees, by 9 July 2012. After considering the views of Council, the Authority is then required to prepare and publish its response before finalising a Plan for consideration by the Commonwealth Minister.

Today's meeting marked a significant point in discussions between Basin ministers towards finalising Council's feedback to the Authority. Key issues under discussion include:

- Potential to incorporate an SDL adjustment mechanism into the Basin Plan with the objective of enhancing environmental outcomes and reducing socio-economic impacts;
- Apportionment of the shared 'downstream' component of Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) reductions;
- Proposed groundwater SDLs; and
- The merits of a formal review of SDLs in 2015, (as is currently proposed in the draft Plan).

Ministers requested officials to undertake further work on a methodology for measuring environmental outcomes. Ministers also asked the Authority to continue to develop an SDL adjustment mechanism through which environmental works and measures could be counted as reductions against held water for the purposes of bridging the gap, and requested the Authority to undertake a further modelling run of a 3200 GL SDL reduction with key constraints removed.

Ministers acknowledged and expressed their appreciation for the significant role played by the wider community, industry and environmental organisations and local government in responding to the draft Basin Plan through the formal public consultation period.

Minister's noted the budgetary decision taken by NSW to substantially reduce its contributions to jointly funded river operations and natural resource management programs administered by the Authority, and agreed to consider a revised Murray-Darling Basin Corporate Plan and budget in coming weeks.

Ministers were briefed on outcomes to date from the series of Environmental Works and Measures Program projects underway as part of The Living Murray initiative. Environmental outcomes from these projects, located at a number of sites along the River Murray, (e.g. Koondrook-Perricoota Forest in NSW, Gunbower Forest in Vic and the Chowilla Floodplain in SA), will generate valuable new knowledge on the potential for further environmental works in the Basin.

The Basin Salinity Management Strategy's Annual Implementation Report was approved. The report indicates that continuing high river flows have contributed to maintaining river salinity at Morgan SA below the target of 800 EC for 95% of the time for the second year in a row. Salt interception schemes have averted salinity peaks during low flow periods in the lower end of the River Murray. High river flows have also reduced salinities in the Lower Lakes although it was noted that salinity levels in Lake Albert remain high. Ministers noted that there may be an increase in dryland salinity in some areas as water tables begin to rise after the drought.

Ministers also noted the The Living Murray Annual Implementation Report 2010-11 and Audit of The Living Murray Implementation 2010-11.

Ministers welcomed the news that as a consequence of a wet autumn, water storages across the basin are either full or very close to full, with total Basin storage levels at 92 per cent of capacity.

Professor Ian Falconer, Acting Chair of the Basin Community Committee, provided Ministers with an update on the activities of the Committee. Ministers noted that the second term of the (BCC) would be re-aligned to begin with the implementation phase of the Basin Plan in 2013.

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