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Barnaby Joyce looks to revive health audit of Murray-Darling Basin

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New Water Minister Barnaby Joyce is considering reviving a comprehensive audit of the health of the Murray-Darling Basin, after it was axed by state governments three years ago.

The most recent Sustainable Rivers Audit found that in 2010, 21 of the 23 valleys in the basin were in a poor, very poor or extremely poor condition.

"I would consider the reinstatement of the [Sustainable Rivers Audit]," Mr Joyce said.

Down the river

"An audit process I think is crucial. I like processes that are based on science, as long as people have an honest appraisal of it and don't just pervert the science or use the science for another alternative or direction."

The Sustainable Rivers Audit was the most comprehensive assessment of river health ever undertaken for the Murray-Darling Basin.

It set key outcomes and benchmarks to measure and track the health of the 23 waterways looking at fish, vegetation, physical form and hydrology.

Half-way into the implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, scientists said it was not possible to directly compare how the 23 valleys had changed.

In 2012, the New South Wales Government cut 60 per cent of its share of funding for the joint management of the system and as a consequence, state governments decided to axe the audit.

Scientists believe without adequate oversight, monitoring and evaluation of the system, governments are effectively "flying blind".

State of the Basin

The basin spans more than 1 million square kilometres and produces 100 per cent of Australia's rice and around half of the nation's fruit and dairy.

But climate change, drought and over-extraction of water from farmers has contributed to the degradation of the river system, and the Government is in the middle of a plan to buy back water licences from irrigators and improve farm efficiency.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan is expected to cost more than \$12 billion this decade.

The Murray-Darling Basin Authority and state governments do track and monitor some areas - including water quality, salinity and waterbirds.

Professor Richard Kingsford conducts some of those waterbird surveys for the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and believes while there is good monitoring of river flows and rainfall, that's not enough.

Professor Kingsford runs the UNSW Centre for Ecosystem Science and identified the lack of monitoring in a submission to the Senate inquiry investigating the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

"The monitoring of environmental outcomes is generally patchy and short-term," he wrote.

"There is a need for long-term funding to ensure stability and commitment to data to inform management in highly variable systems.

"Dry and wet cycles often occur over decades."

Professor Quentin Grafton from the UNESCO Chair in Water Economics and Transboundary Water Governance said while there was some monitoring, nothing had replaced the SRA.

"If you take the fraction that's being spent in terms of an annual basin on monitoring and evaluation, it's about \$10 million a year," he said.

"That's less than 0.1 per cent of the total expenditures on water reform - it's simply not good enough.

"If we're spending \$12.8 billion of taxpayers' money - how can we make sure we're getting value for money and how can we make sure we're getting the outcomes we want?

"The only way is to monitor - it's to actually check whether that's the case or not."

Doctor Terry Hillman, who was involved with the last audit, believes given predictions things are about to get drier, managing the sustainability of the river will be a challenge.

"We're apparently entering a very dry period and we're entering it with very scarce resources in terms of the water [already] stored," he said.

"All the up country storages are quite low, so I think the [Murray-Darling Basin Authority] and its operators are facing quite... an uphill battle this year.

"These are things that we need to learn by facing through in the sense that if we don't measure what we're doing and see what we're doing then you'll make the same mistakes next time and that's not forgivable."

Looking after people

Malcolm Turnbull moved the water portfolio over to Barnaby Joyce upon becoming Prime Minister.

The minister is still receiving briefings but was also the Opposition's water spokesman between 2010 and 2013.

"I certainly want to ensure that as we go out trying to maintain the environmental health of the river, we don't completely destitute people," Mr Joyce said.

Mr Joyce's appointment has been welcomed by farmers - especially in the highly productive irrigation region of Griffith in New South Wales.

"What was refreshing about Barnaby is he has an understanding about agriculture, he has an understanding about irrigation," Griffith Mayor John Dal Broi said.

Mr Dal Broi is also a wine grape grower and has already had a meeting with the Mr Joyce.

"I'm not suggesting and nobody's suggesting that he's going to rip the Murray Darling Basin Plan and rip it apart," he said.

"No, what we're asking for is a bit of common sense towards irrigators."

Trouble at the mouth

One obvious indicator of the health of the Murray-Darling system is the Murray mouth.

The estuarine channel travels through the coastal dunes, linking the Lower Lakes and Coorong with the Southern Ocean.

But when water levels are low, diesel-powered dredges are required to keep the mouth from silting over.

Adelaide based firm Maritime constructions had the contract to operate the dredges for eight years during the Millennium Drought.

In January, it returned with two dredges, which have operated around the clock ever since.

"With the lower flows over the last few years, there's a net ingress of sand into the mouth of 1,800 cubic metres a day," Maritime Constructions CEO Shane Fielder said.

"So some days with a bit of weather and not a lot of flow, you get enormous amounts of sand coming in.

"We basically determine how much dredging needs to be done based upon fortnightly reviews of the mouth."

The Murray-Darling Basin plan aims to keep the mouth open without the need for dredging for at least nine years in ten over a long-term average.

Craig Wilkins from the South Australian Conservation Council said the current dredging effort was a sign that more water is needed.

"This is one of the most important wetland systems in Australia," he said.

"We've promised the international community we'll look after it, and the biggest indicator of the success of this commitment is right here at the Murray mouth. If that's being dredged, we're not succeeding."

Mr Wilkins said South Australians would be watching the new Federal Water Minister closely.

"The next six to nine months are going to be absolutely crucial to the success of that plan," he said.

"There's going to be some serious negotiations and number crunching done. But essentially the water's not coming down yet, and until we seal that, the mouth is going to speak for itself."