

Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists Proposal for an Independent Science Accreditation Panel

We have been told in recent weeks that there are major changes proposed to the scientific methodology in the draft Basin Plan, and that those changes in methodology will result in a significant reduction in the environmental flow requirements to those described in the Guide released late last year.

The purpose of the Basin Plan is to implement the 2007 Water Act. That Act requires the Basin Plan to identify a means of returning over-allocated rivers to sustainable levels of extraction. That outcome, by definition, must be based on the best available science.

Given these circumstances, it is essential that this new science is subjected to an open, transparent and independent peer review process to accredit the quality of this new science.

If this new information is not subjected to independent peer review, then the draft Basin plan will not have any scientific credibility.

The 2 day Science Leaders Forum organised by the Authority, does not in any way constitute such an independent review. It is certainly not an acceptable alternative to the proposal the Wentworth Group put to the Authority on the 8th April, to establish an *Independent Science Accreditation Panel* (copy of proposal attached).

The great innovation of the National Water Initiative in 2004 was to restore the health of the river systems across the Murray Darling Basin, whilst at the same time using water reform as an opportunity to modernise irrigated agriculture in Australia.

Through the Commonwealth Parliament in 2007, over \$10 billion of taxpayers money has been appropriated to drive this reform.

The Murray Darling Basin Plan presents a once in a generation opportunity to modernise irrigated agriculture and restore the health of the river systems across this vast river basin.

It would be a public scandal if \$10 billion of public funding did not deliver a healthy and productive river system.

New science that is not subject to an independent, transparent peer review, is not science; it is simply the interpretation of science by a government Authority.

Wentworth Group's suggestion for an Independent Science Accreditation Panel for the Murray Darling Basin Plan

Context:

The Murray Darling Basin Plan must be based on the best available science. There needs to be an open, transparent and independent process to accredit the quality of the science in the draft, and subsequent final Basin Plan(s).

Proposal:

The Board commission an Independent Science Accreditation Panel to:

Accredit the Sustainable Diversion Limits in the draft Basin Plan as being consistent with the requirement of Water Act to return overallocated rivers to sustainable levels of extraction, based on the best available science.

This Panel would report directly to the Board of the Authority.

Step 1:

The Board will need to specify the environmental flow objectives for the Basin Plan:

The Plan will use the best available science to determine the volume of water that is required for the environment in each of the catchments across the Basin to make it possible to:

1. Maintain and restore the ecological function of the rivers and aquifers in each of the catchments of the Basin to at least a 'moderate' health (based on the SRA metric);
2. Maintain and restore wetlands of national and international significance (the 2,442) in each of the catchments of the Basin to at least a moderate condition;
3. Maintain a healthy, functioning estuary.

Step 2: Commission an Independent Science Accreditation Panel to:

1. Review the analysis undertaken by the Authority since the release of the Guide, including the evaluation of all submissions that are related to the science.
2. Accredit a whole of Basin Sustainable Diversion Limit, and a Sustainable Diversion Limit for all catchments across the Basin, in the draft Basin Plan, using the best available science, as being consistent with the environmental flow objectives described above.

Timeframe:

A public report released by the end May 2011.