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The management of environmental water and its scarcity dominates discussion at Riversymposium

The fate of the Murray River, the transportation and allocation of environmental water and the introduction of a world first in environmental flow measurement took centre stage at the 10th International Riversymposium & Environmental Flows Conference today.

Experts from the Murray Darling Basin Commission today revealed the Murray River would have stopped flowing all together if intervention had not been implemented to improve the river's environmental flow.

During the 'Living Murray' panel session, Murray Darling Basin Commission's Lindsay White said the Murray River has stopped flowing before, during the 1912 Federation drought and would have done so again due to the severe drought which is currently affecting Australia.

"If the Murray River had not been so heavily regulated its natural environmental flow would have ceased to exist," he said.

"At this point the flow is still highly reduced but we hope to have 500GL of water at our disposal for re-watering of the region by June 2009.

"Through our Pilot Environmental Water Purchase we will purchase the water entitlement rights of owners, farmers and irrigators who are willing to sell their water rights within a certain price range and already we have received a great deal of expressions of interest totalling 20GL. We have a total of 273GL of water from other water recovery projects on our book.

Considered one of Australia's most precious environmental resources, the Murray-Darling Basin covers 1,061,469km². More than two million people live and work within the basin with another one million people depending on its water from outside the basin.

It encompasses nearly 1.9 million hectares of irrigated crops and pastures which account for 75 per cent of Australia's irrigated crops and pastures and is worth an estimated \$10 billion to the economy.

"Unfortunately due to market fluctuations and the fact these expressions of interest are not legally binding we do not have a guarantee that all of these expressions of interest will eventually be distributed into the Murray River," Dr Wendy Craik Chief, Executive of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission said.

"But in saying that, this is a trial program and the objective of it is to learn how it can be done effectively while also helping to keep the river healthy and viable.

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Dedicated to a better Brisbane



International Riversymposium is part of Riverfestival, an initiative of Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Government.

“In comparison with the rest of the basins in Australia, 86 percent of the Murray-Darling Basin has virtually no run-off with the run-off accumulated accounting for 6 percent of the national total.

Also discussed on the third-day of the 10th International Riversymposium and Environmental Flows Conference was the latest breakthrough method in measuring environmental flows which was presented by Freshwater Ecology Professor Angela Arthington from Griffith University.

The new method - Ecological Limits of Hydrologic Alteration (ELOHA) - will save global river managers a lifetime of work by developing environmental flow ‘rules’ for different types of rivers which will be applied to rivers across the world within a decade.

Professor Angela Arthington told the symposium the ELOHA team was currently working on mapping the environmental flows for Queensland and estimates it will have mapped the whole of Australia by the end of the year.

“We should look at options for every river including regulated rivers like the Brisbane River and we are now moving to an era with a technique like ELOHA that we can do that faster than we have in the past by working on regional river types,” she said.

“When the rivers cease to flow there are places that still hold water and that is where the animals and the plants survive and this group of survivors is the germinal population which will reproduce on site or some of them, when the water comes back, will move to other places and breed which is why it is essential to protect those final refuge sites.”

The ELOHA system has been developed by Queensland’s Griffith University in conjunction with The Nature Conservancy in the United States.

Other sessions of interest included the Agriculture session with speakers discussing the health of the Great Barrier Reef, wetland restoration on sugar cane farms in Australia’s tropics and a Dams session which discussed a number of dam case studies including some of Queensland’s most controversial dams and the laws surrounding water infrastructure.

The 10th International Riversymposium & Environmental Flows Conference is held in partnership with The Nature Conservancy and the four-day conference concludes tomorrow on Thursday 6 September 2007.

It is part of Riverfestival – a 10-day annual celebration of Brisbane’s iconic river, its people, art, culture and environment from 31 August to 9 September, 2007.

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