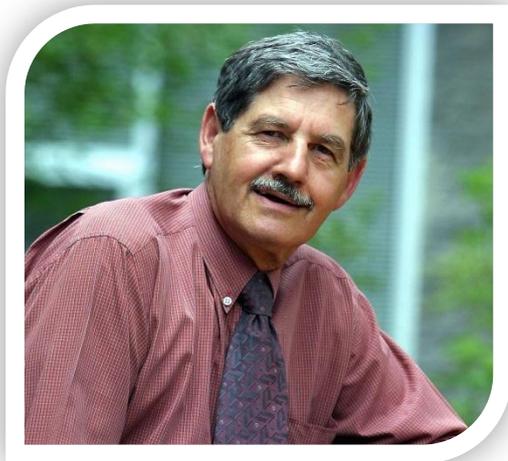




KEYNOTE SPEAKER



PROF BARRY HART

Murray-Darling Basin Authority

THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN PLAN: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN RIVER BASIN PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

The Australian nation is on a journey that will see the allocation of the Murray-Darling Basin's water resources rebalanced, and result in the environment, agricultural production and local communities becoming more sustainable, and also increasingly resilient to changes that will be faced in the future, the most pressing being climate change.

The increased recognition over recent years that too much water has been allocated to consumptive uses saw the passing of the Federal Water Act in 2008. With this Act, the Commonwealth and State governments established the MDBA as an independent body responsible for negotiating the Basin Plan, and put environmental water on an equal footing with consumptive water.

Major challenges for the MDBA are: (a) to establish the environmental water requirements of the Basin's key ecological assets and functions, (b) to determine the scale of change required to achieve improved environmental outcomes with minimal socio-economic impacts, and (c) to work with the Commonwealth and State governments and the community to ensure the additional volumes of environmental water needed to ensure a sustainable environment are efficiently and effectively managed.

To achieve these changes will require a paradigm shift in the way the Basin's water resources are managed. For the past 50+ years management has been largely focused on the efficient delivery of consumptive water, mainly for irrigation. This is particularly so in the highly regulated southern Basin. Considering environmental water on an equal footing with consumptive water will require major changes in river operations, water resource allocation and storage rules, and other existing policy.

The Proposed Basin Plan released in August 2011, and now being widely discussed, outlines a strategy to return consumptive water to the environment. The Authority has indicated its judgement (with evidence) for the scale of this change, establishing a starting point for a new more sustainable water allocation regime.

The Authority has also outlined a process to be implemented over the 7-year period from 2012 to 2019 to arrive at a rebalancing of the Basin's water resources. This process will involve broadly 5 steps:

- Establish a starting point sustainable diversion limit (SDL) in the initial Basin Plan to be completed in early 2012,
- Assisting the Commonwealth to develop effective strategies for the \$8.9 billion investment in 'buy-back' and infrastructure modernisation,
- Work with States and local communities to identify and cost possible environmental works and measures that could increase the starting point SDL,
- Undertake further research, investigations and modelling aimed at improving the knowledge-based on the environmental watering requirements of the Basin's key ecological assets and functions, which could potentially increase or decrease the starting point SDL,
- Work with the Commonwealth and States to identify policy and other constraints that if changed would provide more efficient environmental watering and also potentially increase the starting point SDL.

This paper will discuss some of these challenges in implementing this process to rebalance the Basin's water resources.