

Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council

Communique

26 November 2004

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council today agreed to an initial four water recovery proposals under the first step of The Living Murray Initiative. Implementation of the proposals is subject to resolution of issues relating to the National Water Initiative by COAG.

The four proposals from Victoria and New South Wales will recover 240 GL at a cost of \$179 million (**Attachment 1**). This is nearly half the water to be recovered in the First Step decision, costing about 35% of the budget agreed at COAG.

These proposals, when implemented, will provide new water for environmental flows for the River Murray and the six significant ecological assets. They will also lead to improved irrigation infrastructure, creation of a new separate tradeable water product in northern Victoria and reliable access to stock and domestic water for landowners in the Darling Anabran.

The Council noted the progress made over the last 12 months in implementing The Living Murray including funding for four feasibility assessments of infrastructure projects which may ultimately result in water recovery in excess of 60 GL (**Attachment 1**). A further call for proposals will be made shortly.

Under the \$150M Environmental Works and Measures Program 38 projects are currently underway including development of hydraulic models, additional watering of drought stressed red gums at 5 sites on the Chowilla Floodplain and fishways completed at the barrages and at Locks 7, 8 and 15 in 2004 (**Attachment 2**).

The Council agreed the Business Plan for The Living Murray and to its public release. Activation of the Business Plan would also be subject to resolution of issues relating to the National Water Initiative by COAG.

Council reaffirmed the importance of future community consultation regarding The Living Murray. The Living Murray Business Plan identifies that a consultation group will be established for each of the 5 site specific significant ecological assets. In addition the CAC will establish a Community Reference Panel in consultation with the Commission, which will provide advice on all aspects of The Living Murray including the Environmental Watering Plan and the River Murray Channel.

Council adopted end of valley salinity targets submitted by NSW, Queensland and South Australia and noted that assessment of the expected outcome from the end of valley targets will be undertaken once the Victorian and ACT targets have been submitted.

Council also agreed to publish the Basin Salinity Management Strategy 2002-03 Annual Implementation Report and the Report of the Independent Audit Group for Salinity 2002-03.

Council also approved the construction of a serial flushing system as part of the Salt Interception Scheme at Lake Tutchewop at a cost of \$4.3M.

Council approved the award of a contract of up to \$7.5M for continuing sand pumping works at the Murray Mouth.

Council noted progress on the Condamine-Balonne Water Resource Plan and that the Queensland Cap can be agreed once all Murray-Darling Basin Water Resource Operational Plans for Queensland are complete.

Council noted progress on interstate water trade and the removal of barriers to trade and that a recommendation to expand the extent of trade would be brought to Council in early 2005.

Council discussed the continuing dry conditions, which combined with growth in water consumption up to establishment of Cap in 1995, has resulted in unprecedented impacts on River Murray irrigators and the river, its wetlands and floodplains.

Council noted a proposal for a possible initiative for the Darling River. They also noted that the Commission is currently preparing a scoping report on this possible initiative and that the CAC is holding a community forum in Moree, NSW in December 2004.

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