

## CONTINGENCY PLANNING IN THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN

In the face of the prolonged drought, Murray-Darling Basin contingency planning commenced in November 2006.

### Planning for continued low water availability

Given the critical circumstances, governments decided to alter the state water sharing arrangements under the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement so that bulk water allocations to New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and South Australia were enough to meet human consumption needs in each state.

In addition, contingency plans have been developed by state governments for all towns and cities in the southern Murray-Darling Basin. Many towns have put in place 'no outdoor watering' restrictions, sought alternative water sources (e.g. bores) or are carting water for domestic use. Industrial users accessing town water are being encouraged by state governments to adopt water saving measures.

The continuation or relaxation of 'no outdoor watering' restrictions is a decision that state and local governments will make in response to water availability as the season progresses.

Decisions about water allocations for irrigators are made by state governments and are being kept under continual review as the season progresses.

### Outlook continues to be serious

The 2007-08 water availability outlook for the southern Murray-Darling Basin is continuing to deteriorate, despite near average rainfall in the first half of 2007. Higher than average rainfall over many months is needed to turn around the situation.

Allocations to entitlement holders across the southern Murray-Darling Basin are still zero or very low. The loss of some permanent plantings has already occurred and there is a significant risk of future losses.

### Allocating bulk water to Victoria, NSW and South Australia

First Ministers agreed in April 2007 to vary water sharing under the terms of the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement, such that critical water supply to each state was able to be delivered.

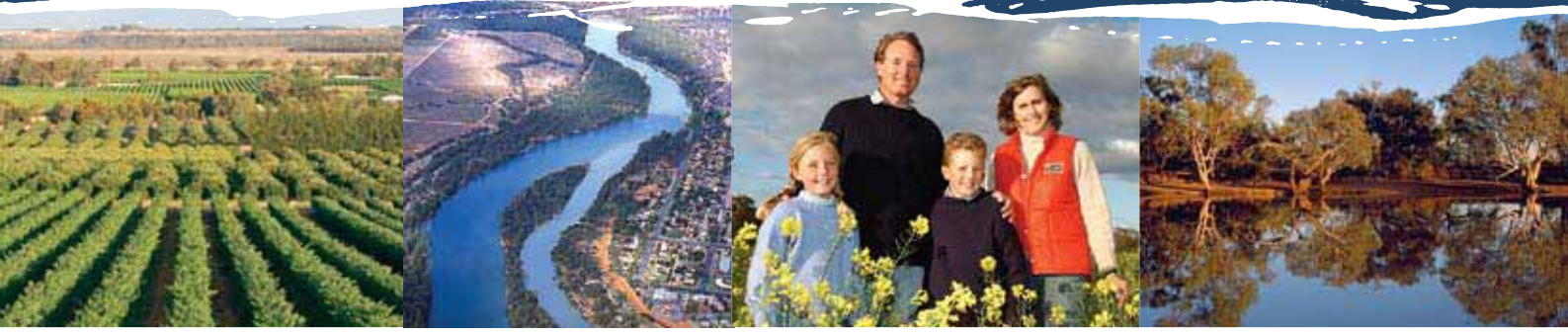
Any improved inflows, above the amount allocated to States for critical demand and until total water availability reaches 2,200 GL, is being shared to enable some water to be distributed to each State. Within the arrangements South Australia gives up some water earlier on to provide water for NSW and Victoria, and as improvements continue to occur through the season, Victoria and NSW give up water to South Australia to recognise its early contributions.

### Disconnecting wetlands

One of the measures agreed by governments to help conserve water for human needs is to disconnect certain regulated wetlands from the River Murray.

Due to river regulation in the River Murray the wetlands are always full of water and do not undergo periodic wetting and drying cycles. Environmental managers will balance the need to avoid drying out those wetlands where long-term damage may occur and focus on sites where long-term benefits can be gained.

Suitable wetlands are identified based on whether a site provides water for human use and whether the environmental impacts are acceptable. Any action that will or is likely to have an impact on matters of national environmental significance will be subject to the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).



The Australian Government has responsibilities under the EPBC Act for the protection of certain defined matters of national environmental significance including world and national heritage properties, wetlands of international importance, nationally threatened species and ecological communities, migratory species, nuclear actions and Australian marine areas.

### Contingency planning updates

Senior officials from the Australian Government, the NSW, Victorian and South Australian governments, the Australian Capital Territory and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission provide regular contingency planning reports to First Ministers. Overviews of these reports are made available at [www.environment.gov.au/water](http://www.environment.gov.au/water).

In addition, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission publishes regular drought updates and other information on water storage levels. These are available at [www.mdbc.gov.au](http://www.mdbc.gov.au).

### More information

Contingency planning updates will be published as they become available and can be found at [www.environment.gov.au/water](http://www.environment.gov.au/water) or by calling **1800 218 478**