

# **Frequently Asked Questions: Department of the Environment Natural Resource Management (NRM) Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI)**

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## **1. What are the programme MERI plans and why are they important?**

The programme MERI plan (one each for the Sustainable Environment stream, and Biodiversity Fund) provides information on how the programmes will be reported on. For the Sustainable Environment stream and Biodiversity Fund, programme MERI plans include key performance indicators (KPIs). These KPIs will rely on data and information reported by funding recipients, as well as targeted scientific monitoring. In developing a project MERI plan, funding recipients are encouraged to refer to the programme MERI plans available on the Department's website.

## **2. What is the purpose of a project MERI plan and who is required to develop one?**

Most NRM programme funding recipients are required to develop a project MERI plan. This includes Community Environment Grant, Community Landcare Grants, Targeted Area Grants, Reef Rescue projects, and Regional Delivery projects. Specific MERI requirements are detailed in relevant funding agreements and in the MERI plan templates available on the Department's website.

The project MERI plan:

- provides an opportunity for funding recipients to develop and detail projects, identify how project outputs will be achieved and progress towards the project outcomes tracked. The template also provides an opportunity for the logic of the project to be explored and developed;
- is a way of ensuring that funding recipients plan the collection of evidence to demonstrate progress, achievements and contribution to the project objectives;
- ensures that risks have been identified, and planned budget expenditure is documented; and
- form the basis of project reporting, including against planned activities, progress towards delivery of outputs and achievement of outcomes. Reporting against the MERI plan also supports funding recipients to share achievements and lessons learned with the NRM and broader community.

## **3. What happens to the project MERI plan? Can it be updated?**

Your project MERI plan will be reviewed by a departmental officer. Once approved, you will implement your MERI plan and be required to report on its implementation at each reporting period. Your MERI plan provides a useful project management tool to determine if your project is on track to deliver its intended outcome(s).

Changes to project MERI plans need to be discussed with your Departmental grant manager, who will discuss why the change is being made, assess whether it is justified, and whether it significantly changes the project. Changes to project MERI plans may lead to contract (funding agreement) variations.

#### **4. Who approves completed project MERI plans?**

Your project MERI plan will need to be accepted and approved by a departmental grant manager. Sometimes amendments are requested to a plan before it is finalised. You will be notified in writing as to whether the project MERI plan has been accepted. In order for a project MERI plan to be accepted it must demonstrate:

- a) That the project has clear project outputs and project outcome(s).
- b) That methods (or delivery mechanisms) to be employed by the project have a sound basis and that the assumptions about the delivery of the project have been considered.
- c) That the project MERI plan demonstrates a good use of the MERI budget, is consistent with the MERI Strategy and will ensure that the project will gather sufficient evidence of project completion and outcomes.

#### **5. What resources are available to support me to develop the MERI plan and who do I contact if I have a question?**

There are a number of resources available on the MERI page of the Department's website to guide you through the MERI process. In addition the Department can provide assistance through its regionally based staff, grant managers and MERI team ([MERI@environment.gov.au](mailto:MERI@environment.gov.au)).

#### **6. What other impact or outcome monitoring should I be considering and is there guidance to support this?**

The funding recipient determines the most appropriate monitoring activities and approaches to be undertaken as part of their project. Such monitoring activities should aim to demonstrate how the project achieved its intended outcomes (including environmental or socio-economic outcomes).

As indicated in the MERI Strategy, when planning monitoring and evaluation, your approach should include consideration of any standard methods that have been established within the jurisdiction of the project; the broader objectives of the NRM programme; and linkages with other projects within the region.

To support monitoring of impact or condition change, an [ecological monitoring guide](#) has been developed and is available on the [nrm.gov.au](http://nrm.gov.au) website, along with a [video](#) which explains how to use it. Funding recipients should consider whether this, or other state based equivalents are most appropriate for their project.

Other measures you may wish to monitor and report on are outlined in the 'Standard Output Measures and Reporting Information' found in the programme MERI plan on the Department's website.

## **7. What is the Department doing to monitor, evaluate, report on its NRM programmes?**

The Department's commitment to MERI is outlined in the MERI Strategy released in April 2013. In summary this includes:

- providing advice and developing processes, systems and MERI documentation to support funding recipients undertake their MERI responsibilities;
- collating, analysing and reporting on consolidated project data;
- storing and making publicly available relevant project and programme information;
- supporting programme level monitoring, research and evaluation activities across themes, landscapes or regions to demonstrate the impact of the programme; and
- providing timely updates on programme progress and achievements.

The Department has developed a programme MERI plan, which outlines the approach to monitoring evaluating and reporting on NRM programmes.

## **8. What sort of change can be expected to be monitored throughout the project?**

In many cases it is difficult to be able to demonstrate long-term environmental change within the life of a project. However, it is often possible to monitor indicators of change which can predict longer-term changes, particularly in multi-year projects. The form of monitoring you choose will depend on the size and timeframe of your project. Ecological monitoring can be continued after the project has finished to monitor ongoing site condition and demonstrate longer term outcomes. Funding recipients are encouraged to do this where possible.

Where your project is in a region that has a longer term monitoring strategy you may be able to demonstrate that change over time will be picked up through this regional monitoring, rather than undertaking your own monitoring.

## **9. How will project reporting occur?**

Project and program reporting will occur through the department's new online monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement tool (MERIT) from January 2014. There are a separate set of frequently asked questions on MERIT available on the Department's website.

## **10. What are the financial reporting requirements?**

Financial reporting requirements are detailed in funding agreements, and will typically involve the following (requirements may differ for some projects – check your contract):

- Submitting a pre-end of financial year report, including a declaration that milestones for the reporting period will be met. Milestones will generally include activities (particularly delivery of outputs) as detailed in the project MERI plan.

- Submitting an end of year financial report including:
  - A certificate signed by a representative of the recipient with the authority to make representations on behalf of the recipient stating whether:
    - : the funds have been used for the purpose for which they were provided; and
    - : all terms and conditions of the agreement were complied with; a report on the amounts of project generated income earned, the uses made of these, and any remaining amounts of project generated income.
- An audit report containing audited financial information (refer to funding agreement) by a qualified accountant.