

Water Ministerial Council Meeting communique

28 June 2024

Introduction

Water Ministers for the Commonwealth and all states and territories met today, for the first time in more than a decade to renew their commitment to work together to protect, restore and manage Australia's water resources for future generations.

Central to their discussions was a shared commitment to renew the 2004 National Water Initiative (NWI) Intergovernmental Agreement which has been Australia's blueprint for sustainable water resource management. The NWI was instrumental in guiding the establishment of the Commonwealth *Water Act 2007* and addressing issues of overallocation in the Murray–Darling Basin. Most jurisdictions have largely achieved their 2004 NWI obligations through their sustained commitment to implementation. Ministers noted the [Productivity Commission's 2024 Final Report into National Water Reform](#). The Commission found that the NWI has served Australia well, but there is an urgent need for renewal to better address the impacts of climate change, changing water demand and to strengthen commitment to the interests and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Ministers recognised the national imperative to increase the productivity and efficiency of Australia's water use, the need to service rural and urban communities, to ensure the health of river and groundwater systems and to achieve better holistic and substantial outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

In the 20 years since the NWI was signed, Australia's water management landscape has evolved. Australia is experiencing the effects of climate change and a greater variability in water availability. Longer, hotter droughts and more intense floods and bushfires are impacting the health and cultural heritage of waterways, and the livelihoods of communities. Australia's water resources are facing increased demand, with growing urban and regional populations, expanding agriculture, mining and new industries.

Ministers agreed on the Terms of Reference and forward workplan for the renewed Water Ministerial Council. The Ministerial Council will be advised by a Committee of senior officials (National Water Committee) from each of the jurisdictions. The Terms of Reference also provide for the Ministerial Council to receive advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples representatives through the Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests (CAWI) and for two CAWI representatives to attend and present to the Ministerial Council. In recognition of the pivotal role local government plays in owning and operating water infrastructure in some areas of Australia, especially in regional areas, the Australian Local Government Association has been invited to attend as an observer.

Climate outlook and response

Ministers were advised by the Bureau of Meteorology on the long term climate projections for Australia. In particular that Australia is likely to see rainfall reductions across the south of the continent, and an intensified hydrological cycle, with more extreme periods of wet and dry conditions. The Bureau outlined how information on climate change projections is being used to inform water resource planning and management.

Ministers discussed how jurisdictions were preparing for the impacts of climate change on water resources.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Outcomes

Ministers received advice from the Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Water Interests (CAWI) on priority national First Nations water reform, in line with the water values, principles, and actions as outlined in the [Insights Paper](#) developed by CAWI. CAWI reinforced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' right to self-determination and access to secure, healthy and quality water, as given effect through the inclusion across all aspects of water management, ownership and governance, and underpinned by free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and the protection of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).

Ministers agreed to include an objective in the new National Water Agreement to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' water interests and values. Ministers noted progress to establish the Murray–Darling Basin Aboriginal Water Entitlements Program and the interim water holding arrangements that would enable water purchases to commence.

National Water Reform and Actions

Ministers noted the updated Objectives and Outcomes that provide the foundations for a new National Water Agreement and released these as part of the [National Water Reform – Outcomes Framework](#).

Ministers considered early feedback on the Objectives and Outcomes of the new agreement and released the [What We Heard Report](#). Ministers also noted that the advice from the [Productivity Commission](#) had been considered in the development of the Objectives and Outcomes.

The Objectives and Outcomes will set out new priorities for national water reform and are the building blocks to improve sustainable water planning in a changing climate, strengthen influence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples interests in water management and to meet new challenges to Australia's water security.

Ministers considered transparent monitoring and governance arrangements to ensure accountability of all parties to the agreement. Ministers decided that once the National Water Agreement was finalised all jurisdictions, including the Commonwealth, will have up to two years, to develop action plans. The Ministerial Council will oversee the implementation of the new agreement.

Ministers announced a further round of public consultation would open on the Agreement's detailed principles in the third quarter of 2024 and discussed a pathway for finalising the new agreement.

Town and City Water Security Framework

Water security is essential to the prosperity of towns and cities across Australia. All communities need an adequate supply of good quality water to support human health and wellbeing, the economy and healthy living environments. It has been difficult for towns and cities to deal with water security issues because there hasn't been a consistent national approach to measuring water security. The [Town and City Water Security Framework](#) has been developed as a voluntary tool to help all levels of government assess, better prepare for, and respond to changes in urban water security. Ministers tasked the National Water Committee to develop an implementation plan, supported by industry and local government. The implementation plan will assist individual jurisdictions implement the Framework to help communities understand how to sustainably manage their finite water resources.

Great Artesian Basin Water Security

Australia's Water Ministers noted the Commonwealth's commitment of \$32 million over four years from 2024-25 to deliver on-ground water security projects in the Great Artesian Basin. The Great Artesian Water Security Program follows on from previous successful jointly funded programs that achieved significant water savings and helped stabilise water pressure in the Great Artesian Basin. It was noted that the Commonwealth Minister would seek matched

funding from Great Artesian Basin governments and/or third parties. Ministers considered it a strong example of what could be achieved when jurisdictions worked together on water security challenges.

Closing comment

Ministers highlighted the strong commitment of all jurisdictions to work together to best manage Australia's water resources to provide security for communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, economic purposes and the natural environment.

A meeting of Murray–Darling Basin Ministers follows.