



## Australian Government

### Commonwealth Environmental Water Office

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#### Floodplain Harvesting

Floodplain harvesting policy needs to support healthy waterways and catchments. Unlicensed and unmanaged floodplain harvesting has significant negative impacts on the health of our waterways and the communities that rely upon them.

Australia's framework for water reform, [the National Water Initiative](#) (NWI) identifies floodplain harvesting as a form of take that, when not controlled, forms a risk to the integrity of water access entitlements. In 2004, Basin states agreed that floodplain harvesting should be licensed, measured and subject to rigorous compliance, as a matter of priority.

The principles and views expressed in this paper have broad application to floodplain harvesting wherever it may occur within the Murray-Darling Basin.

The independent Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) supports the following principles:

#### **There must be no growth in water use beyond the Basin Plan limits.**

- Floodplain harvesting must be limited, and where necessary reduced to the limits set down in the Basin Plan.

#### **All water use must be licensed**

- All floodplain harvesting must be licensed.

#### **Appropriate triggers for when floodplain harvesting take can occur**

- There should be appropriate triggers and/or event management for when floodplain harvesting is allowed to commence and when it should cease.
- Triggers to protect events or portions of events that are important for local and downstream environmental and human needs should be in place, especially after longer drier periods.

#### **Priorities of water access are given effect across the Basin**

- Any floodplain harvesting should have lower priority than other forms of take.
- Rules governing water access priorities should be consistent across administrative boundaries in connected river systems. For example, downstream critical human and environmental water needs should be met before lower priority upstream needs, including floodplain harvesting.
- Floodplain harvesting access is opportunistic. There has been significant growth in floodplain storage capacity over recent decades and its proper regulation and management is urgently needed.

#### **Protection of held and planned water for the environment**

- Held environmental water and managed releases of planned water for the environment from water accounts should be protected from floodplain harvesting take.

### **Licensing arrangements will be subject to periodic review of effectiveness**

- Transparent periodic review and scrutiny of the arrangements is needed to ensure community confidence and trust.

### **A healthy Basin must be connected and flowing (longitudinally, laterally, and temporally)**

- End-of-valley flow targets, or similar, should be established to provide for connectivity throughout the Basin. Where flows have ceased and first flush inflows are resuming, these targets should be met before lower priority forms of take are allowed.
- Environmental water that flows into the Menindee Lakes needs to be recognised and protected. Similarly, environmental water that flows from one catchment into another must be recognised and protected.

### **Ecologically important places and flows will be protected**

- Water sharing rules should protect ecologically important places and flows, e.g., Ramsar-listed wetlands, other wetlands that are significant at both the national and state level, and water dependent ecosystems.
- The timing of flows is critically important. For example, the first flow after a dry sequence should be for the environment, communities, and the river.

### **All water use must have strong, transparent, robust monitoring and compliance**

- Best practice measurement and independent monitoring should apply to floodplain harvesting, as it should for all forms of take.
- While monitoring of floodplain harvesting for compliance purposes presents significant challenges due to both the uniqueness of each floodplain structure and the unpredictability of flood events, it needs to be done to the best levels possible.
- Removal of excess storage would make compliance easier where new licences issued are less than the existing dam capacity. Strong confidence in active monitoring and compliance activity will be required to ensure community trust is rebuilt.

### **Communication, education, information and transparency**

- Continued and improved communications and education programs to inform the wider community and public about floodplain harvesting.
- This should include the ongoing timely sharing of information about floodplain harvesting, the overall take (or non-take) in each system in each year, along with broad information about the measurement, monitoring and outcomes from implementation of floodplain harvesting management.

In summary, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder wants the following key principles adopted and incorporated into arrangements developed by water agencies to manage floodplain harvesting. They are considered prerequisites to any licencing arrangements:

### **Key principles**

- Take restricted to long term limits within each valley
- Floodplain harvesting regulations must integrate with effective rules to protect downstream outcomes, consistent with legislated priorities of access, thus reducing the potential complexity of management and compliance
- Strong measurement, monitoring, compliance, and public reporting
- Ecologically important locations protected
- Ecologically important flow events protected all the way through the Basin
- Regular monitoring and transparent reviews of effectiveness.