



**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

Submission to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority

2026 Murray–Darling Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper

30 April 2026

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak body for environment and climate groups in the ACT Region. We represent close to 50 member groups, bringing together a united voice on environment and climate issues to Government, business and community.

Since 1981 we have been at the centre of the region's most important wins for wildlife, bushland, climate and communities. As a hub for the ACT Region's environment and climate movement and a not-for-profit, non government organisation, we run campaigns, promote and upskill local groups, undertake research, advocate passionately, and engage and inform our community.

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Introduction

The Conservation Council of the ACT Region (the Conservation Council) thanks the Murray-Darling Basin Authority for the opportunity to provide feedback on the *2026 Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper*. The Conservation Council's submission makes recommendations primarily in relation to the management of the Upper Murrumbidgee River.

As a member of the [Murray-Darling Conservation Alliance](#), our vision is for a healthy and flourishing Murray-Darling Basin, where rivers flow from their source to the sea; Traditional Owners own and manage land and water; where wetlands support abundant life and communities are supported with diverse and resilient economies. We refer to the [MDCA's submission](#) on the Discussion Paper for our broader recommendations on Basin Plan management.

The Upper Murrumbidgee River is in abysmal condition and faces systemic challenges under the current Basin Plan. These challenges include insufficient flows downstream of Tantangara Dam to sustain ecological function, poor water quality, and impaired river connectivity; issues that are further compounded by fragmented governance and insufficient monitoring frameworks. Addressing these issues in a refreshed Murray-Darling Basin Plan will be essential, not only for the ecological health of the Upper Murrumbidgee but for the resilience and sustainability of the Basin as a whole. As such, the Conservation Council recommends:

- **Strengthening environmental flow allocations and protection, including applying enforceable, volumetric environmental release targets for the Murrumbidgee and montane rivers.**
- **Restoring seasonal flow regimes in the Upper Murrumbidgee and increasing the frequency and magnitude of high-flow events to support ecological processes.**
- **Integrating climate-adjusted planning into Basin systems.**
- **Improving river connectivity and habitat condition, to support the recovery of native fish species.**
- **Reconsidering the interaction between the Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed and Snowy Water Licence and the provisions of the *Water Act 2007* so that the Upper Murrumbidgee River receives the same protections and monitoring that apply to other Basin rivers.**
- **Enhancing monitoring, transparency and governance arrangements, including through extending the remit of the Inspector-General of Water Compliance to the Upper Murrumbidgee and other montane rivers.**

These reforms are urgent and necessary to ensure the Basin Plan delivers on its core objective of maintaining a healthy and functioning river system. Within the ACT, the Basin plays a vital role in supporting both human and environmental systems. The region's waterways, including the Murrumbidgee, Molonglo, and Cotter Rivers, provide essential drinking water, support agricultural activities and underpin recreational and cultural values (ACT Government 2026). These catchments also sustain important ecosystems and provide habitat for a range of native and threatened species, contributing to the broader ecological health of the Basin.

The Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment

The Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment is a particularly important headwater system that influences downstream hydrology, water quality and ecological conditions across the Basin. The catchment supports critical wetland systems and endangered subalpine sphagnum bogs, including the Ramsar-listed Ginini Flats Complex, and contributes to water supply for both environmental and consumptive purposes (Murray-Darling Basin Authority 2025b). Maintaining the integrity of flows is critical for supporting the health and resilience of downstream ecosystems and communities, particularly those in the ACT.

However, substantial scientific evidence indicates that the current Basin Plan (2012) is not delivering adequate environmental outcomes in the Upper Murrumbidgee. River health has declined significantly due to long-term flow regulation, particularly associated with Tantangara Dam infrastructure and the Snowy Hydro Scheme, which diverts a large proportion of natural flows (McGuire & Pittock 2025). Across the Basin, approximately one-third of surface water is extracted for human use, with the vast majority of this allocated to irrigation, placing significant pressure on river systems (Wentworth Group 2019). Environmental flows are consistently below target levels outlined in the Basin Plan and are insufficient to maintain ecological function, and altered flow regimes have reduced seasonal variability and limited the occurrence of ecologically important high-flow events (McGuire & Pittock 2025).

These pressures are compounded by broader systemic issues identified across the Basin. Monitoring, evaluation and compliance frameworks remain inadequate, with limited transparency and incomplete data hindering effective assessment of environmental outcomes (Colloff et al. 2024). Furthermore, current policy mechanisms lack scientific robustness and may overstate ecological benefits (Lyons et al. 2023; McMahon et al. 2024). Climate change further exacerbates these challenges, with declining inflows, increased variability and growing competition for water resources posing significant risks to both environmental and human water needs (Pittock et al. 2023).

Ecological impacts are already evident in the Upper Murrumbidgee, including declining water quality, sedimentation, habitat degradation and the continued decline of native fish species such as Murray Cod (*Maccullochella peelii*), listed as Vulnerable, and Macquarie Perch (*Macquaria australasica*), listed as Endangered under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. These outcomes reflect a broader pattern identified in Basin-wide assessments which highlight ongoing risks to environmental health despite decades of water reform (Murray-Darling Basin Authority 2025a; Colloff et al. 2024).

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Increase, enforce and protect environmental flows

- a. **Increase environmental water allocations.**
- b. **Apply enforceable, volumetric environmental release targets for the Murrumbidgee and montane rivers.**
- c. **Ensure legal protection from extraction for environmental flows.**
- d. **Implement transparent accounting and tracking systems.**

The Council considers that the current environmental flow settings in the Upper Murrumbidgee are insufficient to maintain ecological health and do not reflect the water requirements of a functioning river system. Evidence indicates that environmental flows are consistently delivered at below-target levels, representing only a small fraction of natural flows, while the majority are diverted for hydropower and consumptive use (McGuire & Pittock 2025). Across the Basin, approximately one-third of surface water is extracted for human use, with over 90% of this allocated to irrigation, placing sustained pressure on environmental flows (Wentworth Group 2019). As a result, riverine ecosystems are unable to sustain key ecological processes, including fish spawning, maintenance of in-stream habitats, sediment transport and the inundation of floodplains and wetlands. This shortfall reflects a broader gap between environmental water requirements and actual delivery. Estimates of water needed to sustain Basin ecosystems have been progressively reduced over time due to policy and political constraints, rather than updated ecological evidence (Colloff & Pittock 2022). The Conservation Council therefore recommends that each of the Snowy Montane Rivers, including the Murrumbidgee, should receive a separate volumetric allocation linked to defined environmental targets that are monitored and subject to annual public reporting, as occurs in the rest of the Murray-Darling Basin.

Another key limitation of the current framework is that environmental flow targets are not enforceable. Existing arrangements establish maximum targets rather than minimum requirements, meaning there is no guarantee that flows will be delivered, even in years when water is available (McGuire & Pittock 2025). This undermines the effectiveness of environmental water and limits the capacity for long-term ecological recovery. The Conservation Council recommends that science-based and enforceable minimum environmental flow targets be established, informed by ecological requirements rather than non-binding maximum volumes.

In addition, environmental water is not adequately protected once released into the river system. Significant volumes may be extracted downstream, reducing the ecological benefits of environmental flows and weakening the integrity of Basin-wide water management (McGuire & Pittock 2025). This issue reflects broader concerns across the Basin regarding transparency, accounting and the protection of environmental water (Colloff et al. 2024). The Conservation Council recommends that the Basin Plan ensure environmental flows are legally protected from extraction through protected flow events, restrictions on downstream pumping during environmental flow releases, and improved compliance monitoring. Transparent accounting and tracking systems should also be implemented for environmental water, including clear reporting

of releases, losses and downstream use, to ensure that environmental water achieves its intended outcomes.

Recommendation 2 – Restore natural flow regimes

- a. Restore seasonal flow patterns, including baseflows, flow pulses and overbank flows.**
- b. Increase the frequency and magnitude of high-flow events to support ecological processes.**
- c. Enable more adaptive and flexible environmental flow delivery to respond to climatic and hydrological conditions.**

Alterations to natural flow regimes are a key driver of ecological decline in the Upper Murrumbidgee, most notably due to flow regulation associated with Tantangara Dam and the Snowy Hydro Scheme, which significantly reduces and redistributes natural flows. Environmental flow requirements are defined not only by volume but also by specific timing, duration and frequency needed to sustain ecological processes (Wentworth Group 2023). River systems are adapted to seasonal variability, with higher flows in winter and spring and lower, but more consistent, flows in summer. However, current flow management has significantly reduced this variability, resulting in simplified and highly regulated flow patterns that do not support ecological processes (McGuire & Pittock 2025). The loss of seasonal flow variability has also had significant implications for native fish, with altered flow regimes disrupting spawning cues and reducing recruitment success in species such as Murray Cod and Macquarie Perch (McGuire & Pittock 2025; Murray–Darling Basin Authority 2025a). The Council recommends that environmental water be managed to restore seasonal flow patterns that more closely mimic natural hydrological cycles. This includes maintaining adequate baseflows during dry periods, delivering flow pulses to provide ecological cues and enabling overbank flows where appropriate. Restoring seasonal variability is essential to support ecosystem recovery and improve the long-term resilience of river systems.

Furthermore, the reduction in high-flow events in the Upper Murrumbidgee has had significant ecological consequences, with Basin-wide evidence highlighting that high-flow and overbank events are rarely achieved under current flow regimes (Wentworth Group 2023). High-flow events are critical for mobilising sediment, maintaining channel structure and supporting key ecological functions. Their absence has contributed to sediment accumulation and declining water quality, with flow alteration identified as a key driver of environmental risk in the Murrumbidgee system (McGuire & Pittock 2025; Murray–Darling Basin Authority 2025a). The Council recommends that environmental water be used to increase the frequency and magnitude of high-flow events, particularly during ecologically important periods such as spring. Delivering strategically timed high-flow events will help to restore channel processes, improve habitat complexity and support native species, including fish populations that rely on flow variability for spawning and recruitment.

Finally, current environmental flow arrangements are overly rigid and limit the ability of water managers to respond to changing environmental conditions. In many cases, flow volumes and timing are predetermined, limiting the capacity to align environmental releases with natural

rainfall events or emerging ecological needs (McGuire & Pittock 2025). This lack of flexibility reduces the effectiveness of environmental water and constrains adaptive management. The Council recommends adopting a more adaptive and flexible approach to environmental flow delivery. This includes enabling real-time decision-making to align environmental releases with natural flow events and adjusting flow timing to meet ecological requirements. Increasing flexibility in flow delivery will enhance ecological outcomes and support more effective water management under increasingly variable climate conditions.

Recommendation 3 – Integrate climate change into Basin water planning

- a. Update Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) and Basin Plan settings using climate-adjusted hydrological models.**
- b. Increase environmental water allocations to account for declining inflows and increased variability.**
- c. Prioritise headwater systems, including the Upper Murrumbidgee, as climate refugia within Basin planning.**

Current Basin Plan settings, including Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs), are not adequately informed by climate change. Existing frameworks rely heavily on historical climate and flow data, which do not reflect current or projected hydrological conditions. Evidence indicates that climate change is already reducing water availability across the Basin (Pittock et al. 2023). As a result, the gap between environmental water requirements and available water is expected to increase under future climate scenarios (Colloff & Pittock 2022). This limitation presents a significant risk to environmental outcomes, particularly in systems such as the Murrumbidgee, where flow patterns are already highly altered. The Council recommends that SDLs and broader Basin Plan settings be updated using climate-adjusted hydrological models that incorporate projected changes in rainfall, runoff and temperature. This will ensure that water allocation decisions are based on realistic future scenarios and improve the resilience of Basin management.

Declining inflows and increased climate variability are expected to place additional pressure on already stressed river systems. Without adjustment, existing environmental water allocations will become progressively less effective, as reduced water availability limits the capacity to deliver ecologically meaningful flows. This is particularly concerning in the Upper Murrumbidgee, where environmental flows are already insufficient to maintain river health (McGuire & Pittock 2025). The Council recommends increasing environmental water allocations to account for the anticipated impacts of climate change. Maintaining current ecological conditions will require a greater proportion of available water as overall inflows decline. Ensuring adequate environmental water under future climate scenarios is essential to prevent further ecological degradation.

Headwater systems such as the Upper Murrumbidgee are likely to play an increasingly important role as climate refugia under future climate conditions. These systems provide relatively cooler water temperatures, critical habitat for native species, and important contributions to downstream flows. However, they are also highly vulnerable to reduced inflows, increased extraction and ongoing regulation. The Upper Murrumbidgee should be explicitly

recognised as a priority system for climate adaptation within the Basin Plan. Targeted measures are needed to protect flows, maintain ecological integrity, and support species resilience in these headwater environments. Strengthening protection of these systems will not only benefit local ecosystems but also enhance the resilience of the broader Basin.

Recommendation 4 – Improve river connectivity

- a. Prioritise the investment in the Upper Murrumbidgee for fish passage upgrades and removal of barriers to movement.**
- b. Improve floodplain and groundwater connectivity to support wetlands, vegetation and ecosystem function.**

Connectivity within the Upper Murrumbidgee system is significantly impaired by barriers such as dams and weirs, which restrict fish movement and disrupt ecological processes. The Murrumbidgee has been identified as a priority system for native fish recovery, with barriers to movement limiting the effectiveness of environmental flows and contributing to ongoing population declines (Murray–Darling Basin Authority 2025a). Fragmentation of river systems reduces access to critical habitats required for spawning, feeding and refuge, particularly for migratory species. Improving fish passage is therefore essential to restoring ecological function. The Upper Murrumbidgee must be prioritised for targeted investment in fish passage infrastructure, and planning for any new infrastructure must ensure that fish movement is not further restricted. Improving connectivity will enhance the effectiveness of environmental water and support the recovery of native fish populations.

Floodplain connectivity is critical for maintaining healthy river systems, water-dependent vegetation, supporting wetlands and broader ecosystem function. In the Murrumbidgee, high levels of regulation have reduced the frequency and extent of floodplain inundation, limiting the capacity of rivers to support these ecological processes (Murray–Darling Basin Authority 2025b). This disconnection has contributed to declining vegetation health and reduced ecological productivity. Connectivity challenges also extend to groundwater systems, which are not fully integrated into current Basin planning despite their importance for sustaining connected ecosystems (Ross et al. 2023). Improving floodplain and groundwater connectivity should be a key priority of Basin Plan reform. This includes enabling flows to reach low-lying floodplains and wetlands by increasing environmental water and removing constraints that prevent inundation. Addressing barriers such as infrastructure and land-use constraints will be essential to restoring these processes.

Recommendation 5 – Improve water quality and catchment health

- a. Invest in riparian restoration, erosion control and catchment rehabilitation.**
- b. Strengthen monitoring and public reporting of water quality across the Basin.**

Catchment condition plays a critical role in determining water quality outcomes. In the Upper Murrumbidgee, land-use pressures, erosion and sediment inputs have contributed to declining river health and habitat degradation (McGuire & Pittock 2025). These impacts are exacerbated by altered flow regimes, which reduce the river's ability to naturally transport sediment and maintain channel structure. Investment in catchment restoration is essential to address these

pressures. This includes restoring riparian vegetation to stabilise riverbanks, reduce sediment inputs and improve habitat quality, as well as implementing erosion control measures across the catchment. Improving catchment condition will enhance water quality, support biodiversity and increase the resilience of river systems to climate change.

Effective water quality management requires consistent monitoring and transparent reporting. However, current monitoring frameworks are fragmented and do not provide a comprehensive picture of water quality trends across the Basin (Colloff et al. 2024). This limits the ability to identify emerging issues, assess the effectiveness of management actions and ensure accountability. Strengthening monitoring and reporting frameworks is therefore critical. This includes establishing consistent water quality indicators, improving data accessibility and requiring regular public reporting of results. Enhanced transparency will support better decision-making and enable independent scrutiny, thereby improving confidence in Basin water management.

Recommendation 6 – Strengthen monitoring, reporting and transparency

- a. Establish a comprehensive, standardised Basin-wide monitoring framework, including a Basin Plan monitoring requirement for the Upper Murrumbidgee in the NSW-ACT region.**
- b. Improve transparency through regular public reporting and accessible data.**
- c. Extend the remit of the Inspector-General of Water Compliance to the Upper Murrumbidgee and other montane rivers.**

Effective Basin management depends on the ability to accurately measure environmental outcomes. However, current monitoring frameworks are fragmented, inconsistent across jurisdictions and insufficient to assess whether the Basin Plan is achieving its objectives. Evidence indicates that many indicators of Basin health are either not monitored consistently or lack complete and reliable data, limiting the capacity to evaluate environmental outcomes (Colloff et al. 2024). A comprehensive and standardised Basin-wide monitoring framework is therefore required. This should include consistent ecological indicators, improved data collection across all jurisdictions, and a Basin Plan monitoring requirement for key systems such as the Upper Murrumbidgee, as proposed in the Discussion Paper (pg 84). Strengthening monitoring will enable more robust evaluation of environmental outcomes and support adaptive management.

Transparency is critical to ensuring accountability and building public confidence in Basin water management. Current reporting arrangements are complex and do not provide a clear or complete picture of environmental outcomes. In some cases, data is incomplete or no longer publicly available, further limiting transparency (Colloff et al. 2024). This lack of transparency is particularly problematic given evidence of discrepancies between expected and observed flow outcomes in the Basin (Wentworth Group 2019). The Council recommends improving transparency through regular, accessible, and comprehensive reporting of flows, environmental outcomes and water use. Data should be presented in a clear and consistent format to enable meaningful interpretation and independent scrutiny.

A key limitation of the current Basin Plan framework is the lack of independent oversight. Monitoring and reporting processes are often undertaken by the same institutions responsible for implementation, creating a risk of conflicts of interest and reducing accountability. This has been identified as a broader governance issue across the Basin (Colloff et al. 2024). The Council recommends extending the role of the Inspector-General of Water Compliance to the upper Murrumbidgee and other montane rivers, and including in their role a 5-yearly evaluation of governance. This would provide independent scrutiny that is essential to ensure that Basin Plan commitments are being met and that environmental outcomes are achieved.

Recommendation 7 – Strengthen cross-jurisdictional governance and increase the ACT’s involvement in Basin decision-making

- a. Strengthen cross-jurisdictional governance and coordination across the Basin.**
- b. Recognise and embed the role of headwater jurisdictions, including the ACT, in Basin Plan decision-making.**
- c. Reconsider the interaction between the Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed and Snowy Water Licence and the provisions of the *Water Act 2007* so that the Upper Murrumbidgee river receives the same protections and monitoring as other Basin rivers.**

Effective management of the Murray–Darling Basin depends on strong coordination between jurisdictions. However, current governance arrangements remain fragmented, with inconsistent approaches to water management, environmental flows and implementation across states and territories. These inconsistencies limit the effectiveness of Basin-wide policies and reduce the capacity to deliver coordinated environmental outcomes. This fragmentation is particularly evident in systems such as the Upper Murrumbidgee, where multiple governance frameworks operate concurrently. Water management is influenced not only by Basin Plan settings but also by arrangements associated with the Snowy Hydro Scheme, which are not fully integrated into Basin governance. This creates coordination gaps and limits the effectiveness of environmental flow delivery. Strengthening cross-jurisdictional governance is therefore essential. The Council recommends improving alignment of water planning frameworks, enhancing coordination between state and territory governments, and ensuring that Basin Plan objectives are implemented consistently across jurisdictions. Greater integration across governance systems, including those associated with major water infrastructure, will support more effective and cohesive management of shared water resources.

Headwater regions play a critical role in shaping downstream hydrology. Despite this, current Basin governance arrangements do not adequately reflect the importance of upstream jurisdictions such as the ACT. The Upper Murrumbidgee is a key contributor to Basin flows, yet the ACT has limited formal influence over broader Basin decision-making processes. This reduces upstream jurisdictions' ability to influence outcomes that directly affect their river systems and downstream contributions. There is a need to more explicitly recognise the role of headwater systems and jurisdictions within Basin Plan governance. This includes strengthening the ACT's involvement in decision-making processes, ensuring that upstream perspectives are

considered in water planning and recognising the importance of headwater protection for Basin-wide outcomes.

Lastly, the provisions of the Commonwealth *Water Act 2007* should be extended to the Snowy and montane rivers to ensure that the same sustainability principles and measures that apply in the rest of the Murray-Darling Basin are extended to the upper Murrumbidgee and Snowy rivers. The Stream Flow Indicator sites and Environmental Water Requirements used in the Basin should be extended to the upper Murrumbidgee and Snowy rivers.

Conclusion

The poor condition of the Upper Murrumbidgee demonstrates that the current Basin Plan is not delivering the environmental outcomes required to sustain a healthy and functioning river system. Despite significant investment in water reform, environmental flows remain insufficient, natural flow regimes are heavily altered and ecological decline continues across key indicators of river health. These challenges are not isolated, but reflect broader systemic issues across the Basin.

The Conservation Council urges the Murray–Darling Basin Authority to adopt a strengthened, scientifically robust Basin Plan that prioritises environmental protection, supports climate resilience and recognises the critical role of headwater systems such as the Upper Murrumbidgee. Ensuring that environmental water requirements are met and that governance frameworks deliver real outcomes will be essential to securing the future health of the Basin.

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