Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group

The first meeting of the Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group was held on 25 August 2021 and focused on low and no flows data in the Barwon-Darling

The Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group (the group) has been established to provide feedback to the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment's approach on river connectivity as part of the development of the Western Regional Water Strategy.

While this process does not replace public consultation with the community and other stakeholders, the participation of this group provides the department with a range of diverse perspectives to consider on connectivity before public consultation in the second half of 2021.

The group consists of representatives from Aboriginal nations, water user groups, conservation groups, local government, the Murray Darling Basin Authority and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office. A summary of the first meeting is provided below.

The first meeting

Due to COVID-19 considerations, the meeting took place online via MS Teams from 9.15am – 1.00pm The objective of this meeting was for all members to:

- have a clear understanding of the role of the group, its purpose and how they contribute
- develop a shared understanding of the available data and evidence on low flows and no flows in the Barwon-Darling as a basis for future discussions about connectivity.

The draft Terms of Reference was discussed, including the Code of Conduct. The department has since amended the Terms of Reference to clarify that the discussions of the group will focus on low flow and cease to flow connectivity conditions.

A presentation was shared about the data and evidence on low flow and cease to conditions, responding to three questions frequently posed to the department, for discussion by the group and outlined below.

Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group

Communique #1 - 25 August 2021

1. Did the Barwon-Darling River flow constantly before upstream development?

Summary of data	Key points raised by members of the group
The data demonstrates that the Barwon-Darling did not flow constantly before upstream irrigation development, and that it has stopped during dry periods in our climate	The data is important in helping answer the question, but there needs to be more information on whether the entire length of the river stopped flowing pre 1940s and how other flows have changed over time. Some stakeholders thought the question was too narrow that leads to a yes or no answer, when there should be a broader discussion about the flows in the river. Some stakeholders did not agree that the river stopped flowing before upstream development. Aboriginal knowledge, written and photographic evidence should be used to support answers to this question.

2. Has upstream irrigation development extended low and no-flow periods downstream?

Summary of data	Key points raised by members of the group
Long periods of no flow in the Barwon-Darling are driven by the climate. Development has contributed to increases in the frequency of shorter periods of no flow as well as low flow periods.	There were comments raised about whether using averages across gauges is the best way to represent the information for a very long river system. There was discussion about the impact of development and the climate on low and cease to flow periods

3. Have changes to the Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan around A-class licences, resumption of flows and individual daily extraction components changed no and low flow periods?

Summary of data	Key points raised by members of the group
Modelling of recent changes to the Barwon-Darling Water Sharing Plan have indicated the rule changes will contribute to reducing shorter low and no flow periods.	Key points raised by members of the group The group noted that the impacts of these changes are unlikely to be realised immediately. There were also questions about whether the resumption of flow rule affects water users across different parts of the river equitably. Some stakeholders raised questions about what we should be aiming for in a context of a drier future climate. There was also discussion on the use of Held Environmental Water to achieve connectivity outcomes.

The presentation and questions generated good and robust conversation. The group indicated that the data provided is clear and informative, but they would like it to be peer-reviewed and publicly accessible. Some members also reserved their right to agree or disagree with the conclusions drawn from the data until they have discussed it with their organisations and communities. In closing, the group was asked to think about:

- the time it would take to wait for perfect data and information versus the need to develop and act on the Western Regional Water Strategy.
- the likelihood that extended dry periods - with significant impact on ecosystems - are likely to increase. In this context, what is needed in the future to support critical needs?

All documentation relating to the first meeting will be posted on the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment Water website.

Next Meeting

The next Group meeting will be held in September 2021.