



When will we get water for the MURRAY?

*By Don Henry
Executive Director
Australian Conservation Foundation*

Although the Murray Darling Ministerial Council last week shied away from making a firm commitment to buy water for the ailing Murray, the ministers did agree to revisit the issue in April next year.

Let's hope that is not too late for the river's thirsty ecosystems.

Under current arrangements the Murray loses more than three quarters of its natural flow to water extraction, mostly for irrigation and mostly upstream of South Australia.

To date recovery efforts have concentrated on infrastructure

projects, such as better pipelines, to recover water for the river. These projects are important. But on their own they are not enough.

It is now two years since the Living Murray's target to return 500 gegalitres of water to the river was announced. This is a third of what the scientists say is required to provide a moderate chance of returning the river to health.

Water efficiency measures and engineering improvements are expected to save about 240 gegalitres. But with another 260 gegalitres needed to reach the target, the best option now is for state and Commonwealth governments to get together and buy water from the many irrigators and farmers who are

willing to sell their water entitlements.

Why are water-saving engineering projects not enough?

First, building pipelines takes time, meaning considerable delays between adopting the measure and seeing real water returned to the river. That's time severely stressed ecosystems like the Coorong and river red gum wetlands may not have to spare.

Second, the most cost effective infrastructure options have already been identified. The low hanging fruit has already been picked. Further infrastructure projects would be very expensive.

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Buying water remains the most cost effective and efficient way to return real water to the Murray.

Just ask interests as diverse as SA Labor's Minister John Hill and Nationals' Minister Karlene Maywald, NSW Environment Minister Bob Debus, the recently established National Floodplain Graziers Association as well as Professor Peter Cullen, member of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists and a Commissioner on the National Water Commission.

They have all recently said it's time governments started buying water on the open market to boost environmental flows. Many individual irrigators also think it's a good idea.

To understand how desperate the need is, it's worth having a closer look at the Coorong wetlands. This magnificent ecosystem, made famous for all time by the book and film *Storm Boy*, relies on Murray River flows.

Studies by Dr David Paton, from the University of Adelaide, recently revealed pelicans have not bred in the Coorong for nearly four years (the Coorong was once Australia's largest permanent breeding colony.)

The water of this internationally recognised wetland is now three times saltier than sea water. Twelve species of native fish are locally extinct and the count of migratory wading birds has dropped to 50,000 from 150,000 in the 1980s. Numbers of the curlew sandpiper have plummeted from 40,000 to just 2000 birds.

The dramatic decline of the Coorong demonstrates how urgently the Murray needs fresh environmental flows.

So it's disappointing the Ministerial Council has further delayed the decision to enter the market and buy water.

On the positive side, the MDBC Ministerial Council did approve a rescue package to provide emergency water to a number of desperately dry red gum 'wetlands' along the river. This will help thirsty red gums in NSW, Victoria and South Australia.

The six months between now and next April will give the ministers responsible for the Murray plenty of time to consider their decision on returning real water to the river and the urgently needed next steps.

It will be high time to get on with the job.

Cover photo (courtesy of Amy Hankinson) shows the Murray River between Mildura and Wentworth.

Editor's Note

We wish all
our members
and readers a
happy and safe
Christmas and
New Year



Having just returned from the UK (where I was working for local government on planning matters), I have had an opportunity to compare the place that rivers have within people's lives in the UK and Australia. As European occupation has been more recent in Australia than the UK, the pressure on our river systems has occurred over a much shorter period of time, which has allowed the natural elements of these river systems to remain more visible to communities. People's lives are still closely connected to the 'boom and bust' nature of our rivers and their wetlands and floodplains. And even though I have only been back for a few months, I have already had the opportunity to work with and meet a wide range of people with a strong passion for our inland rivers – a very positive aspect of working with the Inland Rivers Network.

I think the reason that people in Australia do give so much attention to protecting the environment is because we still have areas with a wide range of high conservation values that are worth taking care of. There is a recognition that we need to protect areas while they still survive. This does not mean that such protection and conservation is incompatible with people's livelihoods, rather it is a recognition that a balance is needed and that if we do not look after these areas they can never be replaced. And we will be left with something that is merely an imitation of their previous qualities.

NSW, indeed Australia as a whole, is currently going through an important period of change, which has entailed many people realising the impacts that we are having on our rivers and catchments, and attempting to find ways to reduce our impact so that the environment can be protected and communities can thrive. Needless to say, this has been

a rocky road and will continue to be so, but wherever possible we need to be involved to ensure that the changes that occur will be improvements for the environment. Many processes and outcomes have led people to be cynical, but it has been reassuring to see that despite this the passion people have for our rivers remains, and I hope that this will help us continue to work towards a system that provides for more sustainable use of water and stronger conservation of our ecosystems.

I began volunteering with IRN over five years ago, and for a number of years I worked with several of the IRN coordinators on various projects, including freshwater high conservation value areas. I have also done some work with the Institute for Sustainable Futures on river management and a short stint of volunteer work with the Environmental Defender's Office. My background is in geography and law. I hope to continue the good work that IRN has done over the years and support those with an interest in our inland rivers.

Please feel free to contact me at any time with concerns, stories or information – it would be great to have your input.

Amy Hankinson
IRN Coordinator

Mailbox or inbox?

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Fate of the Straw-necked Ibis in Australia



*By Bev Smiles
Western Networker, NPA NSW*

The Straw-necked Ibis is a colonial nesting waterbird with an average lifespan of 10 years. It breeds up to about eight years of age. Its main breeding grounds are the significant inland wetlands of NSW: Narran Lakes, Gwydir Wetlands, Macquarie Marshes, Booligal Swamp and Low Bidgee. The first three of these wetlands have been Ramsar listed. There have been no 'colonial' wetland bird breeding events in these wetlands for five years, since the 2000 season.

A major miscalculation of government decision-making in December 2004 –January 2005 caused a Straw-necked Ibis hatching to fail. Inadequate environmental flows were provided to the Gwydir wetlands for the breeding to be completed and birds abandoned their nests.

If there is no significant breeding event of Straw-necked Ibis in the next three years, all existing populations of birds will become too old to breed. This is now a national emergency –

not only for this species but also for other colonial nesting waterbirds including the Intermediate Egret, Rufous Night Heron, Glossy Ibis and Australian White Ibis.

The inland wetlands of NSW need significant environmental flows to trigger and maintain large bird breeding events. Because the Macquarie Marshes is one of the largest and most significant inland wetlands in Australia, a major campaign is being prepared to call on both the NSW and Federal Governments to recognise their responsibilities under the Ramsar and international migratory bird treaties and to provide more environmental water.

Less than 20,000 ha of the 220,000 ha marsh has received adequate water since 2000. Only about 600 ha is in healthy condition while 2,000 ha of River Redgums are dying. An environmental flow of almost 75,000 ML is being released to the marshes this spring to build on good rainfall in the area. It was initially expected that this would enable more than 20,000 ha to receive adequate water but extremely dry soil conditions within the marsh

may severely limit the extent of the flooding. Whilst this environmental flow will maintain a small area of marshland it will not be enough to trigger many important wetland functions.

Inland wetlands in NSW need a much larger share of water to support waterbird breeding events into the future.

IRN and National Parks Association of NSW are building a Save the Macquarie Marshes Campaign so that more people are aware of the plight of the Straw-necked Ibis and all other wetland dependent species.

Watch this space.

If you want to help with the campaign please contact
Bev Smiles on
(02) 9299 0000 or at
western@npansw.org.au.

Image of a Straw-necked Ibis colony in a good year provided by the Macquarie Marshes Management Committee.

Fast track amendments to Water Management Act

By Amy Hankinson

After only a week's notice the NSW Government has pushed through major amendments to the Water Management Act late in the evening on 1 December 2005.

IRN, along with other environmental groups, was briefed at 4pm on the day before its introduction to parliament. We understand that this was also the case for other interest groups. This lack of 'timely and open' consultation was in conflict with requirements under the National Water Initiative and has led many people to be greatly disappointed by the NSW Government's approach to the situation.

The amendment of primary concern to the environment movement is the definition of how environmental water can be committed under the Act.

Environmental water can be committed in two of three ways, one of which is 'by reference to the water that is not committed after the commitments to basic landholder rights and for sharing and extraction under any other rights have been met'.

This now means that the priority of environmental water under the Act is largely meaningless, and there is little opportunity to base water management on the requirements of a healthy river. Rather, the intention of the Act to recognise fundamental environmental needs first will essentially be inverted.

This amendment (and a retrospective section later inserted in the Act) has also prevented the Nature Conservation Council of NSW from going to the High Court

on 13 December over the case regarding the Gwydir Water Sharing Plan.

Changes have also been made that affect cold water pollution. Approvals for works including multi-level off-takes (an improvement in dam operations that will reduce cold water releases), and eventually all dam related works, will now be dealt with under the Water Management Act.

However, if such an approval is granted and includes one or more conditions that relate to addressing cold water pollution, any further cold water pollution will no longer be an offence under the Protection of the Environment Operation (General) Regulation 1998.

The conditions listed within the amendments are positive, but one hopes that such conditions will only be included in approvals when there is a genuine intention to address cold water pollution in a timely fashion. Dam operators who gained an approval yet delayed the construction of such a work, or who make a token effort to meet the approval condition, would hopefully lose credibility and have the approval withdrawn.

Other amendments include trading and risk assignment provisions that give effect to requirements under the National Water Initiative, and useful administrative sections that allow the conversion of supplementary water entitlements to adaptive environmental water.

Proposed amendments on changes to local utility licences were removed and are likely to be dealt with in the next session of parliament in 2006.

Stop Press !

Straw-necked Ibis breeding

Rain in the Murrumbidgee catchment has triggered a Straw-necked Ibis breeding event in the Lowbidgee wetlands. While the numbers of ibis preparing nests are fairly small (approximately 10,000 pairs), if successful, it will be a very important event in assisting the ibis populations survive a little longer. There has also been a breeding event of about 5,000 pairs on a Lachlan tributary.

Macro Water Sharing Plans

By Amy Hankinson

The macro planning process, which the NSW Department of Natural Resources is now working on, is intended to fill in most of the areas not currently covered by the 31 gazetted water sharing plans. Nevertheless a number of key areas are being left as they are or will be dealt with under other processes, including the Border Rivers unregulated rivers (covering the majority of major regulated rivers, a few unregulated rivers, and a few stressed groundwater areas). It is intended that 28 unregulated river plans and 12 groundwater plans will be produced.

Obviously, the outcomes of this process will be very important, not least because a number of major inland wetlands in NSW, including the Lowbidgee and Lower Gwydir, were left out of the water sharing plans for those rivers.

The methodology for the plans has been based on two matrices. One matrix compares risk to instream values against community dependence on extraction as a basis for developing daily access rules. The other matrix compares instream values to hydrological stress for developing trading rules. From this the water sources are given 'value judgements', such as whether a water source has low, medium or high instream values, which are compiled with other data from the water source and put into a 'report card'.

There are a number of elements in the macro plans that will be particularly important to follow.

Firstly, it will be important to see whether the environment and river health needs are given priority as required under the Water Management Act.

The second issue of importance is how these plans will interact with the water sharing plans (particularly given the location of valuable ecological assets such as the wetlands mentioned above); how they will ensure that the plans adequately recognise the interconnection between groundwater and surface water systems, including how they will adapt to variations within these systems.

It remains to be seen how problems faced in the water sharing plan process will be overcome.

Another concern about the process is that the public consultation is too little, too late. The DNR has handed draft 'water source report cards' to the Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) and requested that they consult local people. This is problematic as the most relevant people may not be questioned, and there is little room for state-level groups such as IRN to be involved. Furthermore, no comments can be made on the methodology so 'value judgements' in each report card may prove meaningless to many people consulted.

'...input at this stage is very important if we are to get better environmental outcomes than those currently in place.'

The DNR widely acknowledges that there are major information gaps for many of the unregulated systems. It remains to be seen whether the department will develop plans that adequately allow for adaptive management at a later time when information is forthcoming about the needs of the rivers and their ecosystems.

The DNR is intending that these water source report cards are 'consulted on' over the next few months. Please contact your local CMA if you are interested in commenting on the report cards, as input at this stage is very important if we are to get better environmental outcomes than those currently in place.

As consultation is notifiable within local CMA areas only, it is important to keep an eye out for opportunities to participate in the process. Consultation should be for the wider community rather than just 'water customers'.

IRN would also welcome notification of any consultations in your area.

After this consultation process has finished the comments will go back to DNR who will develop draft macro plans later in 2006 for formal public exhibition.

Rivers, wetlands and floodplains – trash or treasures?

By Sue Jones

The Sustainable Floodplain Communities Association (SFCA) was recently established to link and assist landholders (mainly graziers and dry land farmers) and communities who depend on our rivers, floodplains and wetlands for their livelihood. It held its inaugural national conference on 21-22 September 2005 in Dubbo NSW, which was themed *Rivers, Wetlands & Floodplains – Trash or Treasures*.

The main purpose of the conference was to highlight the values of rivers, wetlands and floodplains, to focus on the needs of floodplain communities, and to recognise the impacts and threats that they now face. Presentations were made from a wide cross section of speakers from several states including landholders, scientists, politicians, natural resource managers and community members. Unfortunately the message from most was not a good one, with many showing examples of the damage that is occurring to our floodplains and wetlands from bad and irresponsible government decision-making. However there were also some 'good news' stories, which highlighted the need to better protect the few free-flowing rivers and streams we still have.

It was agreed to form a national floodplain association, comprised of individuals and their affiliated organisations that depend on or are committed to providing natural river flows for ecologically healthy and sustainable floodplains and wetlands. A number of important resolutions were also passed at the conference that will be carried forward by the new association.

The conference proceedings will be available in the near future. If you would like a copy of these or would like more information on the Sustainable Floodplain Communities Association, please contact Sue Jones on (02) 6824 2097 or email jones.j11@bigpond.com.

Some of the matters that will be pursued by the Sustainable Floodplain Communities Association (SFCA) include:

- protection of unregulated flows and free-flowing rivers and streams
- catchment/basin scale for water planning
- implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Cap on rivers and their floodplains
- scrutiny and management of current, and moratorium on additional, levee banks and on-farm storages for irrigation
- acquisition of water for floodplain environments (including the purchase of extractive licences)
- water savings from government-funded water use efficiency projects to be exclusively dedicated to environment
- inclusion of the word floodplain and overland flows in all water legislation and policy
- recognition of the connectivity between rivers and floodplains in both legislation and policy
- development of emergency rescue packages for already stressed areas
- recognition of the legitimate water needs of floodplain graziers
- acknowledgement of the conservation value of rivers, floodplains and wetlands.



*There is important grazing country in
and around the Gwydir.*

Will we have a living Darling?

by Sarah Moles, environmental representative on the Darling Initiative Working Group

After six months of hard work and meetings, the Darling Initiative Working Group (DIWG) proposed a way forward for a Darling Initiative at a public forum in Moree on 28 September.

Eighty people, including several from Broken Hill, a smattering of government employees from federal agencies, South Australia and NSW, and a majority of northern Murrumbidgee Darling Basin (MDB) landholders, attended to listen and have their say. The irrigation sector was particularly well represented.

Importantly, the meeting supported the recommendation that a *State of the Darling Basin* report is an essential next step, particularly as neither the full DIWG nor the public forum have been able to agree on the nature and extent of extraction issues from the Darling Basin.

There was also a great deal of discussion around the proposed structure for a Darling Initiative. Some groups supported the establishment of a body which would provide an overarching role in coordinating community engagement and management for the whole of the Darling River. Other sector groups preferred having CMAs and Regional NRM Bodies carry out this overarching role, although questions were also raised about their

capacity to do this. Unfortunately there was no consensus about the best way to carry the Living Darling concept forward.

The outcomes from the forum, which included a funding request for the development of Terms of Reference for a *State of the Darling* report, were presented to the MDB Ministerial Council on September 30th.

While the Ministerial Council failed to provide funds to take the fledgling Darling Initiative any further, it did direct the Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) to consider the proposal and report back to Ministerial Council at its next meeting (April 2006).

A framework for a *State of the Darling Basin* report has already been developed within MDBC as staff have already recognised the need for such a report. Developing the terms of reference for such a report will be critical in ensuring community support and engagement in any ongoing Darling Initiative and progressing towards a Living Darling.

It is hoped that despite recent changes in Ministerial Council membership, new members and their advisors will rapidly gain knowledge of the MDB and so be able to adequately fulfil their roles and act urgently to deal with MDB issues.

Don't it always seem to go you don't know what you've got 'til its gone...!



Darling entering the Murray.
Photo courtesy of Amy
Hankinson.

Low-down on the National Water Initiative assessment

by Amy Hankinson

The National Water Commission (NWC) has recently embarked on one of its major tasks – assessing the performance of the states and territories in relation to the COAG water reforms and the National Water Initiative (NWI). This will be the first time that the NWC will assess performance against the NWI, with the National Competition Council previously doing the COAG assessment.

However, now that the NWI has come into play in Australia, the assessment will be somewhat different. The initiative was developed following COAG’s reflection on the ten years since the first water reform package was developed.

As the NWC will be assessing progress towards the requirements under both the NWI and the COAG reforms, it will look at outcomes more closely than previously. The NWC will then report to the Prime Minister, and through him to COAG, the states and territories.

Whilst the NWI will not be able to penalise states directly, as the National Competition Council did to NSW in 2004, it can make recommendations for this to happen.

So what is the NWC looking for from NSW this year for the state to get back the \$26 million 2004 penalty? For this particular question, NSW will be assessed as it was in 2004 (note: performance under the NWI was not being assessed in 2004). NSW will need to provide information about its current environmental allocation or show that the environmental allocation is in a range that could reasonably be shown to be based on best available science and socio-economic studies.

So it remains to be seen how the NSW Government will measure up to NWC scrutiny of their performance last year and their recent performance in meeting the requirements of the National Water Initiative, which is underpinned by a recognition of the urgent need to ensure the health of river and groundwater systems.

The NWI includes:

- a commitment to identifying over-allocated water systems and restoring those systems to sustainable levels
- more sophisticated, transparent and comprehensive water planning; the application of a risk assignment framework
- a requirement that water for environmental and other public benefit outcomes is to be given at least the same degree of security as water access entitlements for consumptive use, and be fully accounted for.

Across the Basin

MACQUARIE MARSHES

The Macquarie Marshes have achieved a welcome respite from the dry, due to recent rain. Rain in the catchment has led to the release of environmental flows that have been held in Burrendong Dam.

However, while this water will help the central part of the marshes make it through another hot summer, it is only going to maintain a small percentage of the marshes for a short period.

The marshes have been much drier than expected so the extent of flooding may be much lower than initially expected, perhaps only a core area of 20,000 ha. Much more water is required to give all the marshes a fighting chance.

LOWER BALONNE

QLD are currently finalising their water planning reform but there are expectations in NSW that the level of development permitted in the QLD plans will be too great and water extraction volumes will mean downstream ecosystems and users will suffer. A small amount of rain recently has only provided a marginal flow.

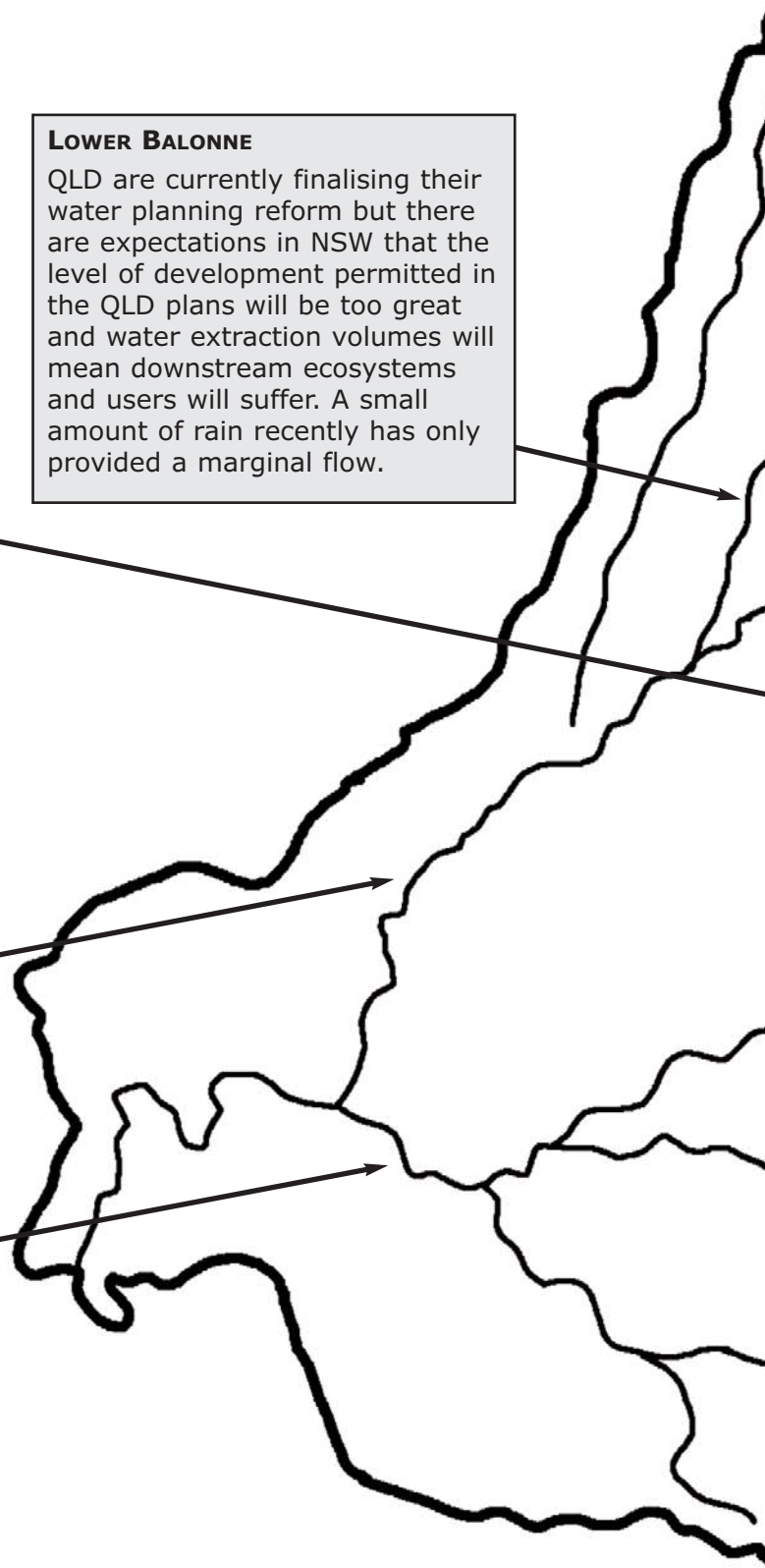
BARWON-DARLING

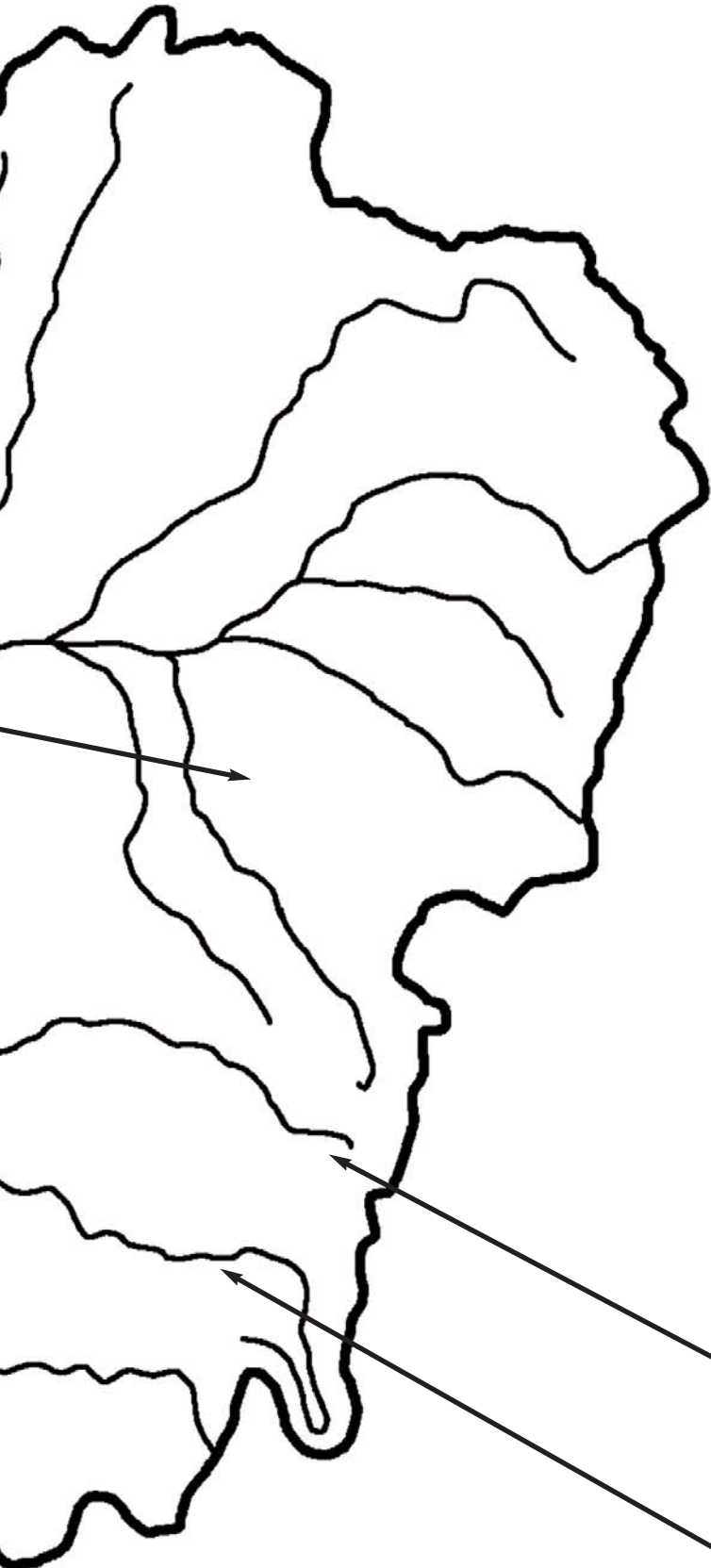
Despite the Government having agreed to a Barwon-Darling Cap in July 2005, the Cap has not been implemented and the region has once again gone over Cap levels.

MURRAY RIVER

Water availability in NE Victoria has meant that there have been enough flows in the Murray for NSW to fully repay the Barmah-Millewa Environmental Water Account. This environmental water has been used to supplement natural flows and has led to positive flooding and triggered a major spawning of silver and golden perch in Barmah-Millewa.

See also the 'River red gum rescue packages' article at the right.





River red gum rescue packages

With recent rain, opportunities have appeared for river red gum rescue packages along the Murray. These have been positive events to maintain the health of some red gum areas and have provided much needed water for areas dying of thirst. Hopefully, these actions will help keep these areas alive until the government finds the 500 GL of environmental water that it promised 2004 under the 'First Step' of the Living Murray.

Victoria and the Commonwealth provided joint funding of \$970,000 to deliver an extra 14 billion litres of water to almost 2,000 hectares of stressed river red gums.

Following this, at the recent Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council meeting, the council agreed to spend an extra \$1.5m to water red gums at 60 sites along the River Murray in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, between October 2005 and June 2006. This will use 18.1 GL of water recovered for the River Murray under the Snowy Water Agreement. Some of the water will also be used to operate fishways at The Barrages in South Australia during the important spring period for many River Murray migratory fish species.

LACHLAN
 Despite some rainfall in the Lachlan catchment the Water Sharing Plan has remained off due to the worst drought on record. However, there has been some ibis breeding (see box) and a 30,000 ML fresh been allowed to the Cumbung Swamp which will provide some useful maintenance flows.

MURRUMBIDGEE
 Localised flooding has led to a small Straw-necked Ibis breeding event. See Stop Press on page 5.

About the Inland Rivers Network

The Inland Rivers Network of NSW brings together community groups and individuals with the goal of restoring and conserving the biodiversity, natural function and health of the inland river systems and wetlands of NSW.

Together with local, regional, state and national conservation groups, IRN seeks to promote greater understanding of the threats to inland rivers and the communities that rely upon their survival.

IRN steering committee member organisations:

- Australian Conservation Foundation
- Nature Conservation Council of NSW
- National Parks Association of NSW
- Coast and Wetlands Society
- Friends of the Earth

Please help IRN protect our inland rivers and bring security and sustainability to regional communities.

Send your donation to:

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