

Darling-Baaka River Action Plan

March 2021

Delegation from the Darling-Baaka in western NSW

- Uncle Badger Bates, a Barkandji Elder from Wilcannia on the Darling-Baaka River.
- Rob McBride, owns Tolarno Station near Menindee Lakes, one of the biggest sheep farms in the world. Rob's family has been on the land for generations, building up one of the most successful family farms in the state.
- Julie McClure is the co-owner of Kallara Station, a sheep property on Darling-Baaka River near Tilpa.
- Derek Hardman, CEO of the Barkandji Native Title group, which recently won a Native Title claim to water.
- Don Stewart, Treasurer of the Darling River Action Group, which is based in Broken Hill.

BACKGROUND

Since the death of millions of fish in Menindee Lakes in 2019, the plight of the Darling-Baaka River and the ecosystems, communities, economies and cultures that rely on it have slipped off the political and media agenda. However, the problems highlighted two years ago are unresolved and new threats are emerging. There are many areas that require action, but we draw your attention to four that are urgent:

Keep the river running along its whole length by slashing water extraction for irrigation to ecologically sustainable levels that are realistic about the effects of climate change.

Limit floodwater harvesting to ecologically sustainable levels by strictly limiting the issuing of new licences.

Keep Menindee Lakes alive — abandon engineering works that will reduce their ecological, economic and community value, and list them under the Ramsar Convention.

Put Indigenous water needs above irrigation industry demands, as is required under the Commonwealth Water Management Act.

KEY POLICY ASKS

KEEP THE RIVER RUNNING

Values

- The 1,500km Darling-Baaka River supports an incredible diversity of plants, animals and ecosystems, thousands of people in towns and on properties, and a thriving mixed economy.
- The river has been home to the Barkindji Traditional Owners for thousands of generations over 65,000 years. It is a bedrock of their culture.

Threats

- Without flowing water, these ecosystems, communities, economies and cultures will die.
- Over-extraction by big irrigators on the tributaries of the Darling-Baaka River, especially during low flows, reduces the river to a chain of stagnant ponds where toxic algal blooms, fish kills and long stretches of dry riverbed have become commonplace.
- The NSW Government continues to support too much water extraction by big irrigators. The government is now considering letting irrigators trap and store billions of litres of floodwater through new floodplain harvesting policies.

Response

- The NSW Government should support voluntary water licences buybacks to reduce the amount of water extracted for irrigation.
- The NSW Government should limit floodplain harvesting licences to ecologically sustainable levels.
- Install gauges at Wilcannia and Menindee to ensure forecast flows are delivered.

LIMIT FLOODWATER HARVESTING

Values

- Floodwaters replenish billabongs, wetlands and floodplains and sustain ecosystems, farms and communities.

Threats

- Illegal private dams, channels and levies trap billions of litres of water that should revive flow into wetlands and floodplains, sustaining downstream ecosystems, farms and communities.
- The NSW Government is poised to grant licences to big irrigators to trap billions of litres of floodwater.^[1]

Responses

- The NSW Government should order the removal of illegal private dams, channels and levies.
- The NSW Government should limit floodplain harvesting licences to ecologically sustainable levels.

KEEP MENINDEE LAKES & GREAT ANABRANCH ALIVE

Values

- The Menindee Lakes is one of the most important wetlands in Australia and has exceptional significance for the Barkindji Traditional Owners and other communities of western NSW.^[2]

Threats

- The NSW Government plans to re-engineer the lakes to hold less water, drain faster and virtually cut off some lakes from the river.^[3]
- The NSW Government hopes the works will help it meet environmental water targets under the Basin Plan big upstream irrigators reducing their take.

Responses

- The NSW Government should scrap the engineering works, nominate the lakes as a wetland of international significance under the Ramsar Convention, and increase flows along the river.

PUT INDIGENOUS WATER NEEDS AHEAD OF IRRIGATION

Values

- The Darling-Baaka River has been home to the Barkindji Traditional Owners for thousands of generations over 65,000 years.
- The Barkandji people rely on the river for their spiritual, cultural, physical and economic well being.

Threats

- Mismanagement of the river, including over-extraction of water by big irrigators, is disrupting cultural practices and undermining the Barkandji people's spiritual, cultural, physical and economic wellbeing.
- The NSW Government lets irrigators at the top of the catchment pump after heavy rain so water is stored in farm dams before it can reach the Lower Darling.
- The NSW Government keeps prioritising the needs of big irrigators ahead of Indigenous communities, towns and the environment, which breaches the Commonwealth Water Management Act.

Responses

- Stop letting irrigators pump at the top of the basin when the river stops flowing along its whole length.
- Enforce the law that requires cultural, drinking and environmental water be delivered ahead of irrigation water, as required by the Commonwealth Water Management Act.

[1] Plans for the plains: the fight over harvesting floodwater in NSW is about to get real, The Guardian, 6-2-2021

[2] Menindee Lakes: Site of massive fish-kill still being mismanaged, SMH, 2-2-21

[3] Controversial Menindee Lakes proposal labelled a waste of time as stakeholder group puts talks on hold, ABC, 20-08-20