

# Rural Water

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AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN  
RURAL WATER  
CLIMATE CHANGE, LAND AND WATER

*Australia has an extremely uneven distribution of rainfall, both geographically and seasonally. The 2006 low rainfall pattern will be typical under projected climate change scenarios meaning the inflows in to our major rivers and city catchments will be significantly reduced. The Murray-Darling basin is in crisis and facing ecological collapse. Healthy rivers are vital to our prosperity and economy. It is essential that we use our water resources wisely and with appropriate regard for the health of our environment.*

## Our Action Agenda

*“Short-term political imperatives have continually triumphed over the long-term interests of the community and our environment when it comes to the management of our river systems.”*

Senator Andrew Bartlett  
Environment  
Spokesperson

- Develop an integrated, strategic **National Water Policy**, informed by a **national accounting program** for water resources and use and underpinned by agreed **targets** delivering short and long term water sustainability, taking into account climate change, population and environment needs.
- **Water market** rules to clarify property rights and to prevent profiteering or speculation by non-users, including foreign interests, to the detriment of water users or the environment. Reset water allocation to sustainable levels and institute a cap and trade water market, preserving water for human consumption and the environment.
- Immediate roll out the government’s \$3 billion commitment to **buy water** from willing sellers to **address water over-allocation**.
- **Funding** for rehabilitation projects for the environmental recovery in degraded and salinity affected areas.
- **Targets** for the recovery of water for the environment in all over-allocated rivers of between 1500 and 3000 GL into the Murray by 2010, and a process for the identification and protection of ecologically and culturally significant freshwater and estuarine areas.
- **Adjustment assistance for agri-businesses** whose business is adversely affected by changes in water availability including walk off provisions.
- **Adjustment assistance for communities** whose economies are affected by changes in water availability and water use patterns.
- **A national framework and Commission** for the regulation of new infrastructure developments (such as dams) based on the principles of ecologically sustainable development and provides protection for ecologically and culturally significant freshwater and estuarine areas. (see Investing in Infrastructure Action Sheet).

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- Coordinated initiatives to improve **water efficiency** in irrigation practices (drip), channel management maintenance, channel lining and piping of water to reduce loss to evaporation and seepage. Monitor and measure of the cost effectiveness of investment proposals.
- A coordinated national freshwater research program to **monitor the condition, development and use of Australia's freshwater resources**. Publish **audit** of river catchment health every 5 years
- Effective **ongoing consultation process** with traditional Indigenous owners regarding management of rivers and catchments on their lands.
- **A national heritage rivers reserve system** that sits along side the terrestrial and marine reserve systems – and at least \$60 million is allocated over 5 years to establish the reserve system and prepare management plans.
- Continue to **monitor and oppose plans for inappropriate water developments** in key areas including the Fitzroy River catchment in Queensland (eg. Nathan Dam), the Lockyer-Burnett-Mary catchment in Queensland (eg. Traveston Crossing Dam); Daly River in the Northern Territory and the Kimberly in Western Australia.
- **Monitor closely** the effect of all types of drilling and boring on Australia's extensive aquifers and groundwater resources.
- **Tertiary treatment of sewage and stormwater** effluent and recycling into river systems or for productive agriculture use.
- Improve governance arrangements by making the **Murray Darling Authority Independent**. Ensure co-ordination and consistency between the \$10 billion National Plan for Water Security with the Murray Darling Basin Plan and National Water Initiative commitments. Ensure accountability in the expenditure of funds and giving effect to the principles of full-cost recovery, user pays and pricing transparency.

## The Issues

The Democrats believe that government must play a much more significant role in effective governance of our scarce water resources, particularly in rural areas where environmental health and the viability of agriculture and rural communities relies on unpredictable rainfall and variable water resources.

While the government is seeking to address the over allocation of water from the Murray Darling as part of the \$10 billion *National Plan for Water Security* package, the expenditure levels and timetable of commencing from 2011 does not reflect the urgency of the problem.



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