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Social and Economic Assessment Panel
GPO BOX 1801
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To the Social and Economic Assessment Panel

Thank you for the opportunity to make submission to the Social and Economic Assessment Panel in response to feedback sought on the Terms of Reference and Assessment Framework.

The Murray Darling Association (MDA) is the peak body for local government across the Murray-Darling Basin, with over 100 councils and community members. The social and economic conditions of Basin communities is a matter that is of fundamental interest to local government, from individual councils to the sector as a whole.

The MDA welcomes Minister Littleproud's commitment to undertake an assessment of the social and economic conditions in Basin communities and acknowledge the collective experience and expertise of the appointed panellists. We support the independent assessment of social and economic conditions in the Basin.

Assessment Framework

- The MDA commends the values of the independent expert panel, and its emphasis on understanding the social and economic conditions in the Basin through the lived experience and wisdom of Basin communities.
- The MDA is concerned that the timeframe of the inquiry appears to be manifestly inadequate to achieve the stated objectives of the assessment, specifically regarding
 - the preparation and communication of the existing literature review,
 - structured engagement with Basin communities as a primary source of evidence
 - working with local governments to seek input and as a conduit of information to communities
 - reporting commitments.
- The MDA strongly supports the emphasis on engagement in the important work of this panel. However, the methodology and process of consultation and evidence gathering needs to be more clearly defined to demonstrate how it can be done in the stated timeframe. Flow diagrams with clearly defined dates within the process of when community/stakeholders can have input would be helpful.
- The assessment framework notes that *the Panel will also work closely with local governments throughout the Basin to seek their input and be a conduit of information to communities. It is important the Panel's work considers and has access to the other important work being undertaken by local... government[s].*

- The framework is unclear how the panel will engage local governments throughout the Basin. With over 150 rural and regional councils in the MDB footprint it will be important to have a structured and effective approach to engaging local government.
- Notification and preparation are important elements of effective engagement with local government. Participatory engagement standards require longer time frames for an assessment of this scale.

Terms of Reference:

- It is unclear whether the panel has been tasked to assess social and economic conditions across the Murray–Darling Basin, as reflected in the Assessment Framework, or to assess social and economic **conditions impacting communities** across the Murray–Darling Basin as stated in the welcome message on the webpage. It should be clarified whether the projects is assessing the social and economic conditions as drivers of change, or conditions as they currently stand.
- The scope as it is currently written is unclear. There is a strong emphasis on ‘genuine engagement’ but a lack of detail on the process to be adopted to deliver on this objective.
- The MDA is concerned that there is no social science or research capability on the panel to process data. It is unclear if and how the panel may be working collaboratively with universities or research institutions to incorporate this capability.
- Inputs and outputs are unclear
- ToR D talks about separating the effects of changing trends in agriculture and communities from ‘events such as droughts’ and the ‘effects of water reforms including the Basin Plan’.
 - It is unclear whether the term ‘events such as drought’ includes or precludes taking into account other factors such as climate change?
 - It is unclear the extent to which the ‘effects of water reforms including the Basin Plan’ will be considered. For example – will the assessment take into consideration the impacts of the unbundling of water from land, a factor widely believed to have been the catalyst for significant adverse social and economic impacts. Similarly, will the assessment consider the effects of water market reforms?
 - It is unclear if these significant factors fall within or sit outside the terms of reference for this assessment.
 - The purpose, process and outputs of this separation is unclear.
 - An understanding of the *cumulative effects*, as distinct from and perhaps in addition to the *separate effects* of these conditions may also be helpful to the assessment.
- It may be helpful to clearly distinguish and express the Scope and Terms of Reference as a single, concise, one page document (such as the [Terms of Reference](#) for the ACCC inquiry into Murray-Darling Basin Water Markets), followed by the more detailed Assessment Framework.

Evidence Gathering and Inquiry

- The assessment framework notes that *alongside the engagement strategy, the Panel will develop and oversee a process of targeted evidence gathering and inquiry. This process has already begun with a stocktake phase to ensure the Panel builds on the extensive research and data available on the Basin and its social and economic conditions.*
 - We commend the panel on undertaking this review/stocktake of existing literature, noting that it is important that any assessment of social and economic conditions in the Basin build on the work already done to avoid replicating it.
 - However, we would recommend that stocktake should be undertaken and complete prior to the engagement phase, in order to inform the development of the next phase of the assessment process and ensure that the engagement and subsequent reporting **does not** replicate work already done.
 - Any failure to incorporate an understanding of the work already done and avoid replication and repetition in consultation may cause frustration at the community level and significantly undermine the confidence of the Basin community in the assessment, reinforcing a pervading sentiment often expressed as: “We were asked exactly the same question 2 years ago? Why should I/we go through it all again? They don’t listen...etc”. This work is too important to risk that response.

The 7 Key Questions:

- The MDA would like to commend the panel on the inclusion of supplementary questions.
- It is somewhat unclear how the information gathered will feed into the reporting framework.
- It will be important to extend discussion beyond just irrigated agriculture. There are many extractive uses of water with direct and indirect impacts on immediate and downstream communities – including extraction for bottled water, mining etc.

Governance arrangements

- The MDA fully supports an independent assessment of the social and economic conditions across the Basin and commends the panel on its emphasis on independence, ethical practice, authenticity and integrity.
- Attachment A to the assessment framework describes the panel members. The chair of the panel is Robbie Sefton. Robbie Sefton is clearly, eminently qualified to chair the panel. Robbie is also the principal of Sefton Rural and Regional Communications Specialists, delivering large scale consultation services to the Australian Department of Agriculture, including NCCP and MDBWIP. It may be beneficial to clarify the relationship between Sefton's and the assessment panel in order to clearly establish its (the panel's) independence.
- Attachment A notes *the panel's work is supported by a secretariat within the Murray Darling Basin Authority*. Correspondence from Sefton on 06 August stated *Either have been appointed Secretariat of the MDB Panel*. This should be clarified.
- Attachment A notes *The Panel is independent, and is responsible for all decisions on how it conducts its work, including how it designs and implements its work plan, engages with Basin communities and other stakeholders, deploys available resources, commissions analysis and advice, and – perhaps most importantly – the judgements it makes when formulating its Interim and Final Assessments*. It is assumed this standard of independence is supported by a corollary standard of accountability.
- The framework it is unclear on what, if any standard of accountability the panel will operate to. It may be helpful and appropriate to articulate the relationship between the panel's independence and its accountability, to ensure actions and decisions taken meet the stated objectives of the assessment, respond to the needs of the community, and build confidence and trust in the outcome.

Other points raised by the regions:

- The section on *purpose and aspirations of the panel* talks about the panel revealing new information and that it will *provide practical information about how water reforms, water management, water trade and other factors will shape the future*. This does not appear to align with panel's role as detailed earlier in the framework. The Draft Scope and Terms of Reference states *the Minister has asked the panel to consider the following points for their terms of reference and for the panel to seek feedback from Basin communities on these points. The panel is to provide feedback and recommendations to the Minister*. It is unclear whether the panel's role is to seek feedback and report to the Minister, or to provide communities with practical advice.
- Branding of the project and the panel is somewhat inconsistent, causing significant early confusion among stakeholders with the communications and engagement.
 - URLs associated with the project include
 - www.basin-socio-economic.com.au
 - independentpanel@mdba.gov.au
 - notifications@engagementhq.com
 - robbie.panelchair@seftons.com.au
 - There are difficulties clearly identifying both the project and the panel, with The Panel taking on a titular identity and referred to variously as
 - Socio & Economic Assessment Independent Panel (address for correspondence on the Assessment Framework document)
 - Socio Economic Independent Panel (address for correspondence on feedback email)
 - MDB Socio-Economic Assessment Panel (website submissions page)
 - Basin Socio-economic Panel (from Engagement HQ)

- The Independent Panel (project media release)
- The Independent Panel for the Assessment of Social and Economic Conditions in the MDB (OpEd in The Land – 10/08/19)
- The Sefton's Panel (in stakeholder dialogue)

To avoid confusion an identified title for both the project and the panel should be settled on.

- We commend the panel for providing multiple means by which stakeholders can engage with the process. However, the stated *need* to register via the Bang the Table Engagement HQ gateway in order to make a submission may create a barrier to participation. Under “Other ways I can provide a submission” the [FAQ webpage](#) notes *...you can upload a pre-prepared submission to the website using the 'choose file' button below (you will need to navigate to your file and upload it)*. There is no file upload function on that page.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the panel for the opportunity to comment on the Scope, Terms of Reference and Assessment Framework. We are hopeful that the above feedback will assist to strengthen the process and the outcomes of this important body of work that is so essential to building confidence and trust in our national water sharing policies and processes.

Kind regards,



Emma Bradbury
Chief Executive Officer