



Australian Government

WATER for the FUTURE

Frequently Asked Questions

Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder

Q: What is the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder?

A: The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder is a position established by the *Water Act 2007* to manage the Australian Government's environmental water. The role of the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder is to protect and restore the environmental assets of the Murray-Darling Basin or assets outside of the Basin where water is held for that area.

Mr Ian Robinson has been appointed as the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder. Mr Robinson is the First Assistant Secretary of the Water Governance Division in the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. He can be contacted at ian.robinson@environment.gov.au or **02 6275 9245**.

Q: Where is the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder based?

A: The position is based within the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts in Canberra. A section has been established within the Water Group of the Department and its role includes managing the water holdings and negotiating and implementing delivery of the water.

Q: How will the Commonwealth acquire water?

A: Water for the environment will be acquired under programs of the Government's *Water for the Future* policy. These programs are managed separately within the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts but the acquired water will become part of the Commonwealth environmental water holdings.

- The *Restoring the Balance in the Basin* program will purchase water entitlements from willing sellers. \$3.1 billion will be spent on water purchase under this program over ten years.
- The \$5.8 billion *Sustainable Rural Water Use and Infrastructure* program will be investing in infrastructure improvements and other projects to help communities make an early adjustment in anticipation of the new Murray-Darling Basin cap. Where a share of water savings is acquired by the Government these entitlements will also be managed as part of the environmental water holdings.

Q: How will the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder decide where to use the water?

A: There is a requirement that water relating to the Murray-Darling Basin must be used in accordance with the environmental watering plan of the Basin.

The environmental watering plan is to be prepared by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. During the transition to the environmental watering plan the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder will be guided by an overriding requirement that the water be used to protect or restore the Basin's environmental assets.

When established the environmental watering plan will aim to protect and restore the wetlands and other environmental assets of the Basin and protect biodiversity that is dependent on water resources. It must specify environmental objectives, targets to measure progress towards these objectives, an environmental management framework and principles to be applied in determining the priorities for environmental water.

A panel of scientific experts has been appointed to advise the Department and the Commonwealth Environmental Water holder on the use of water purchased. The Environmental Water Scientific Advisory Committee comprises seven prominent scientists in fields such as hydrology, limnology, river and floodplain ecology and the management of aquatic ecosystems.

Committee members will provide advice on:

- methods for determining relative priorities for environmental watering;
- areas which merit additional investigation, including additional research; and
- assessing the benefits of the environmental watering.

Q: What type of area will be likely to receive environmental water?

A: Environmental water will be used to protect and restore wetlands of international importance as well as rivers and wetlands which support listed migratory and threatened species.

Water for the Future is a long-term plan to secure the water supply for all Australians. The Government is investing \$12.9 billion over 10 years to address four key priorities:

- Taking action on climate change
- Using water wisely
- Securing water supplies
- Supporting healthy rivers

Watering will vary depending on the needs of the system. In drought years, environmental water may be used to replenish waterholes in river channels which act as drought refuges for threatened species including native fish. In wet years, environmental water may be used to prolong floods in important wetlands to allow bird breeding events to progress to successful fledging.

Due to the prolonged drought, in 2008–2009 the limited volume of water available will be used consistent with the principles agreed by The Living Murray Environmental Watering Group:

- avoiding critical loss of threatened species;
- avoiding irretrievable damage or catastrophic events; and
- providing drought refuges to allow re-colonisation following drought.

Q: When will the first use of water occur?

A: The first use of the Commonwealth's environmental water is expected to occur from February to May 2008–09 during the beneficial autumn period. The total amount of water available for use will depend on outcomes of the purchase program and seasonal water allocations. Volumes of water currently held by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder are published periodically on the website www.environment.gov.au/water/environmental/cewh/holdings.

Q: Will the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder have special rights for its water?

A: No. The rules applying to water entitlements will be the same for all entitlement holders including the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder. As outlined above, and consistent with treatment of other water users, the allocations for the environmental water holdings will reflect the available water in any season.

Q: Are there other environmental water holders, and how will the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder operate in relation to these?

A: Yes. There are other organisations which manage environmental water. These include The Living Murray initiative (a partnership of the Australian and State Governments managed through the Murray-Darling Basin Commission), Water for Rivers (a joint Commonwealth, NSW and Victorian Government entity) and RiverBank (a NSW Government organisation).

In accordance with the principles on the complementary management of environmental water agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder will work cooperatively with the states and territories, other environmental water holders and environmental asset owners. The objective will be to ensure the maximum environmental benefit is achieved from the available water.

Q: Will the water be sold for another purpose?

A: The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder is only allowed to sell water in limited circumstances:

- annual water allocations can only be sold if these are not required to meet environmental objectives **and** if the water cannot be carried over to the next year.
- annual allocations and permanent water entitlements may also be sold if the proceeds are used to acquire other water that will improve the capacity to protect and restore the environment.

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder is not subject to the direction of the Department Secretary or the Minister when exercising powers to purchase, dispose or otherwise deal in water rights. The intention of this is to safeguard independence in relation to key trading decisions.

Q: Will the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder report on its activities? Can I get further information?

A: Yes. Information updates will be provided on the website www.environment.gov.au/water/environmental/cewh and there is a requirement for an annual report to be published and tabled in the Parliament. You can also:

- Call the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts on **1800 218 478**; or
- Send an email to cewh@environment.gov.au; or
- Write to:
Environmental Water Holder Section
Water Governance Division
Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts
GPO Box 787
Canberra ACT 2601

Published by the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. 2008