

SAVE THE DARLING-BAAKA

THE
GREENS

THE GREENS PLAN TO CLEAN UP WATER MANAGEMENT IN NSW AND SAVE THE DARLING-BAAKA RIVER

The Murray Darling Basin is one of the largest river networks in the world containing 16 internationally recognised wetlands, home to 120 waterbird and 20 native fish species and produces \$22 billion worth of food and fibre each year. At the heart of the Basin is the Darling-Baaka River, providing water to much of Western NSW.

But a decade of the Liberal-National Government's mismanagement of our rivers has pushed the Darling-Baaka to the brink of ecological collapse. The National Party is too focused on giving water to their big corporate donors, leaving little for First Nations people, downstream communities and the environment.

The last drought saw the Darling-Baaka river run dry and the Menindee Lakes system fall to record low levels causing massive fish kills. Instead of trying to fix the problem the NSW Government has been dragging its feet to meet its obligations to return water to the environment under the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

The Greens have a plan to save the Darling-Baaka River and manage our water resources in a way that's fair and equitable for traditional owners, communities, farmers and the environment.

THE GREENS WILL:

- ▲ Rein in floodplain harvesting by licensing, metering and reducing take to within legal limits.
- ▲ Establish a Department of Climate, Water and Environment to remove the undue influence of big irrigators on water management in NSW.
- ▲ Keep the Darling-Baaka flowing by setting rules that water can't be taken until water has reached downstream rivers and wetlands.
- ▲ Prepare for a drier basin and factor in climate projections into water allocations.
- ▲ Restore First Nations rights to water through a treaty process that gives water entitlements to traditional owners and improves cultural flows.

SAVE THE DARLING-BAAKA

THE
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REIN IN FLOODPLAIN HARVESTING TO LEGAL LIMITS

Big corporate irrigators in the northern Murray-Darling Basin have been allowed to take vast amounts of water without a licence for decades by building massive structures on floodplains that capture every bit of water available. This take of so much precious water at no cost for private gain almost killed the Darling-Baaka River and Menindee Lakes during the height of the last drought .

Now the NSW National Party Water Minister is handing out hundreds of gigalitres of floodplain harvesting licences worth potentially billions of dollars to these same irrigators for free. These volumes are far above the existing legal limits in the Murray Darling Basin Plan.

A Parliamentary inquiry found that this process would lock in disastrous ecological, social and cultural outcomes for the Darling-Baaka river and other downstream communities and was even potentially unlawful.

The Greens will rein in floodplain harvesting. We will:

- ▲ Implement all the recommendations of the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Floodplain Harvesting including:
 - Regulate and metre floodplain harvesting and bring it within existing Sustainable Diversion Limits under the Basin Plan.
 - Introduce rules that only allow floodplain harvesting when water is flowing downstream.
 - Assess all floodplain structures and decommission those that are illegal or disrupt natural flows.
 - Abolish the secretive NSW Healthy Floodplains Review Committee and replace it with an independent expert panel with rules around transparency .

SAVE THE DARLING-BAAKA

THE
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REMOVE THE UNDUE INFLUENCE OF BIG IRRIGATORS ON WATER MANAGEMENT IN NSW

The Liberal Party has sacrificed the Murray Darling Basin in NSW by handing water management over to the National Party who are only interested in helping out their big irrigator mates.

A 2020 investigation by the ICAC found that the NSW government's management of water over the last decade failed to meet the legislated requirements in the *Water Management Act 2000* and that the water department was unfairly focused on the interests of irrigators over the environment¹.

Water needs to be managed in a way that prioritises environmental outcomes and is free of industry influence.

The Greens will clean up water management in NSW by:

- ▲ Creating an independent Climate, Environment & Water Department

separate from planning, resources and industry.

- ▲ Prohibiting political donations by agricultural corporations.
- ▲ Expand the rules that require a cooling-off period between holding public office and working in an industry which that office regulates to cover all public servants and ministerial staff.
- ▲ Ensure the recommendations of the ICAC investigation into the management of water in NSW are fully implemented, including:
 - Ensure the water management principles in the *Water Management Act 2000* are given effect.
 - Require the water department to record and publish details of all meetings with external stakeholders.
 - Truly independent audits of the ecological health of the Murray Darling Basin.

¹<https://www.icac.nsw.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2020-media-releases/icac-recommends-changes-to-government-water-management-in-nsw-after-years-of-focus-on-irrigation-industry-interests>

SAVE THE DARLING-BAAKA

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KEEP THE DARLING-BAAKA FLOWING

The most recent drought saw the Darling-Baaka River run dry for towns like Wilcannia, Menindee, Bourke and Walgett, while the Darling and Murray rivers were unconnected for two years.

Water Sharing Plans govern when and how much water can be taken in each valley in the Murray-Darling Basin, but these plans fail to adequately consider the impacts that water take in one valley will have on another.

This means our water laws allow water to be taken upstream even when it results in low or no flow of water downstream disrupting the connectivity of the Darling-Baaka River system.

This has devastating ecological consequences, disrupting fish migration and breeding, and pushing rivers and wetlands to the brink of ecological collapse. It's also a failure to meet the water management principles in the *Water Management Act 2000*.

The rules that govern our water need to be rewritten to ensure connectivity. This includes setting 'downstream flow targets' that prevent irrigators upstream from taking water until enough is flowing downstream.

The Greens will keep the Darling-Baaka flowing by:

- ▲ Rewriting water sharing plans to ensure they reflect the water management principles in the *Water Management Act 2000*.
- ▲ Requiring end of system flow targets to be included into water sharing plans to ensure connectivity along the Darling-Baaka.
- ▲ Create rules to guarantee base flows within the Murray-Darling basin and protect low flows and environmental flows.
- ▲ Require the Menindee Lakes to reach 400 gigalitres after a prolonged dry period before irrigators upstream can take water.
- ▲ Increase funding for the Natural Resources Access Regulator along with increased fines for irrigators who break the law.
- ▲ Audit water take by comparing reported water usage with production to

SAVE THE DARLING-BAAKA

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FACTOR IN CLIMATE PROJECTIONS

Climate modelling shows that rainfall and inflows across the Murray-Darling basin are going to decrease in the coming decades. Studies commissioned by the CSIRO have found that water availability in the Murray Darling Basin could decrease by 40-50%².

Yet instead of supporting regional communities by sensibly planning for a future where there is less water to go around, the Liberal-Nationals have buried their heads in the sand. In fact, in 2014, the National Party Water Minister even changed the law to ensure that the most recent and extreme droughts did *not* have to be considered in decisions about how much water should be handed out. Because that would mean less water for his wealthy irrigator mates!

The Greens will ensure that all decisions regarding water allocations factor in climate change by:

- ▲ Ensuring water determinations are based on all historical drought data

²[Plausible Hydroclimate Futures for the Murray-Darling Basin, A report for the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, December 2020, p iv](#)

and the latest peer-reviewed climate modelling.

- ▲ Reviewing and amending the water allocations for each valley based on latest climate projections.

RESTORE FIRST NATIONS RIGHTS TO WATER

First Nations communities along the Murray-Darling Basin have a spiritual and cultural connection to water, yet Governments have ignored the inherent rights of First Nations peoples to protect, manage and own water resources on their traditional Country.

For too long, First Nations peoples have been sidelined with disingenuous consultation processes and false promises.

Restoring the health of our rivers and wetlands means restoring the rights of traditional owners to their water.

As part of our proposed Treaty Process the Greens will restore First Nations peoples inherent rights to protect, manage and own water resources on their traditional Country by:

- ▲ Amending the *Water Management Act 2000* to prioritise Aboriginal cultural heritage and improving

SAVE THE DARLING-BAAKA

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- Aboriginal social, cultural and economic outcomes.
- ▲ Reviewing and rewriting Water Sharing Plans to improve cultural flows and First Nations access to water.
- ▲ Providing water entitlements to traditional owners giving them agency to manage country.
- ▲ Working with Traditional Owners to create culturally appropriate consultation processes that empower First Nations peoples and genuinely influence the outcome of decisions.
- ▲ Directing the water department to develop genuine partnerships with First Nations peoples to self-determine water management.
- ▲ Established an inquiry into the management of Floodplain Harvesting.
- ▲ Brought a multi-partisan committee to the Menindee Lakes to see the impacts of poor water management first hand.
- ▲ Established an inquiry into the Government's disastrous proposed dam projects.
- ▲ Uncovered massive costs and time blowouts for the Dungowan and Wyangala dam projects.

FIND ALL OUR POLICIES:

<https://greens.org.au/nsw/policyplatform2023>

HOW THE GREENS HAVE BEEN FIGHTING FOR YOU

In the last parliament, it was the Greens who:

- ▲ Consistently voted down the Liberal-National Government's dodgy floodplain harvesting laws