Reconnecting River Country Program overview





Aerial view overlooking the town of Balranald in the Riverina district. Credit: Destination NSW

The Reconnecting River Country Program is a key Murray-Darling Basin Plan initiative. The program is essential to creating healthier functioning river systems in the Murray and Murrumbidgee valleys, ensuring future generations can enjoy the benefits of thriving and healthy river systems.

Currently, rivers connect to wetlands and floodplains less often than is needed to maintain healthy ecosystems, due to river regulation and extraction. Water for the environment aims to restore the balance, however constraints, such as any physical, policy or operational barrier limiting the flow of water in river systems, restrict the effective use of this water. These constraints are contributing to the continual decline of the health of Country, including the species depending on these environments to survive.

The program aims to remove constraints to enable the flexible use of water for the environment to increase the frequency and extent rivers connect to their wetlands and floodplains. Removing constraints is

critical to achieving the Murray-Darling Basin Plan's improved environmental outcomes and making best use of existing water recovered from communities.

Under the program, higher, more frequent environmental flows will be used to more closely mimic the river's natural cycle. The frequency, timing and duration of these flows will vary over time according to climate conditions, water availability, ecological priorities and river operation requirements and risks.

The program is an Australian Government funded initiative under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. In 2024, the Australian Government committed \$274 million to fund the program until December 2026.

The Reconnecting River Country Program Murray Project

In the Murray program area, the program is funded to December 2026 to:

- progress technical studies for a future Murray
 Final Business Case, including hydraulic modelling,
 environmental benefits and risk assessments and
 climate change and salinity impact assessments
- replace ageing water infrastructure in the Werai Forest.

Landholder engagement in the Murray program area is currently paused, awaiting consideration by Basin jurisdictions of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's (MDBA) Constraints Relaxation Implementation Roadmap.

To view the Constraints Relaxation Implementation Roadmap visit <u>mdba.gov.au/publications-and-data/publications/constraints-relaxation-implementation-roadmap</u>

The NSW Government continues to work with the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and other Basin state governments to progress work on a Murray constraints project informed by the roadmap.

It's important to note, the program has not yet developed a Final Business Case for the Murray Project. A recommended flow limit for the Murray cannot be determined until the benefits and risks for all flow limit options, including a cost benefit analysis, are considered in a detailed Final Business Case.



Credit: Destination NSW

The Reconnecting River Country Program Murrumbidgee Project

The program's Murrumbidgee Project includes the Murrumbidgee River from Burrinjuck Dam to the junction of the River Murray, including the Yanco-Billabong Creek system. In the Murrumbidgee Project area, funding to December 2026 includes:

- delivery of a Final Business Case (delivered in February 2025)
- progressing actions to provide river operators with the authorising environment to deliver higher environmental flows
- negotiating with affected landholders located within the Phase 1 Murrumbidgee Project area in accordance with the Landholder Negotiation Scheme to support environmental flows in line with the Murrumbidgee Regulated Water Sharing Plan (after December 2026)
- delivery of infrastructure projects to remove and replace critical low-lying public infrastructure, including construction of the new Mundarlo Bridge near Gundagai and the raising of Mundowy Lane near Collingullie (Murrumbidgee)
- scoping public mitigation infrastructure (for delivery after 2026, subject to funding and Basin Plan extension)
- designing and delivery of First Nations enabling measures
- an improved flow notification system.

The Final Business Case summary for the Murrumbidgee Project outlined the recommended upper flow limit of 40,000 ML/day at the Wagga Wagga gauge and a phased delivery approach to maximise progress within the current Basin Plan timeframe.

The upper flow limit of 40,000 ML/day at the Wagga Wagga gauge was recommended because it offers the greatest environmental and cultural benefits, while aligning with the goals of the Basin Plan.

This upper flow limit also performed better than other options considered across other key indicators and maximises the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism offset potential. This will help to reduce the need for further water recovery from the Australian Government (water buybacks) minimising the impacts on NSW communities.

It is important to note, the upper flow limit of 40,000 ML/day at the Wagga Wagga gauge is significantly below the 2022 flood level and below minor flood level in most areas.

Murrumbidgee Project phases

The Murrumbidgee Project is proposed to be delivered in 2 phases:

- Phase 1 (2025 2026) focuses on reaching agreements with the most affected landholders, scoping public works, delivering First Nations measures and an improved flow notification system. This phase aligns with current Basin Plan timeframes and may support higher environmental flows, up to current Water Sharing Plan limits, after 2026, but only if all necessary agreements are in place
- Phase 2 (2027 to 2031) will work to secure the full flow corridor, infrastructure works and First Nations enabling measures. This phase is subject to additional Australian Government funding and an extension of the Basin Plan beyond December 2026.

No higher environmental flows above the current temporary limit will occur before December 2026, and flows at the level of the new upper limit will not commence until after 2031.

After the Murrumbidgee Project has been fully delivered future environmental flows will be able to connect with over twice the area of wetlands and nearly triple the extent of river red gum forests and woodlands compared to current conditions.



Morning sun rising over the town of Narrandera. Credit: Destination NSW

Inundation mapping

Inundation mapping is available on the program's webpage. Visit the online inundation mapping tool to find out if your property is in the flow corridor at water.dpie.nsw.gov.au/rrcp-inundationmapping

Find out more

To find out more about the Reconnecting River Country Program

- visit water.nsw.gov.au/reconnecting-river-country-program
- email water.enquiries@dcceew.nsw.gov.au
- phone 1300 081 047
- subscribe for updates water.nsw.gov.au/RRCPUpdates





Scan the QR code to visit the project webpage.