



MEDIA RELEASE

Senator the Hon Penny Wong

Minister for Climate Change and Water

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KEY STEP IN MURRAY-DARLING BASIN REFORM

New legislation to help secure the long-term future of the Murray-Darling Basin was introduced in the House of Representatives today.

The *Water Amendment Bill 2008* introduces significant reforms to the governance arrangements of the Murray-Darling Basin.

The legislation gives effect to the Intergovernmental Agreement on Murray-Darling Basin Reform, which was signed by the Prime Minister, the Premiers of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia, and the Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory at the Council of Australian Governments meeting on 3 July this year.

“The Murray-Darling Basin is in very bad shape after decades of neglect and mismanagement, years of drought and the onset of climate change,” Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator Penny Wong, said.

“This Bill will help build a viable long-term future for the Murray-Darling Basin.

“It will enable the Murray-Darling Basin to be managed nationally as one river system, recognising that rivers don’t end at State borders.

“The Bill is another step towards putting a scientifically-based limit on water use in the Basin, and towards restoring health to Basin rivers and wetlands.

“It lays the groundwork for a long-term Basin Plan that will balance environmental, economic and social needs.”

Specific reforms to be implemented through this legislation include:

- transferring the current powers and functions of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission to the new Murray-Darling Basin Authority, which will be responsible for preparing the Basin Plan, with the Commonwealth Minister as the final decision-maker;
- strengthening the role of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission by extending the application of the water market rules and water charge rules; and
- enabling the Basin Plan to provide arrangements for meeting the critical human needs of the more than one million people relying on the River Murray for drinking water.

“These reforms are only possible because Basin State governments agreed through the Intergovernmental Agreement on Murray-Darling Basin Reform to pass legislation providing for a referral of relevant powers to the Commonwealth, in accordance with Section 51 of the Constitution,” Senator Wong said.

The Parliament of New South Wales has already passed legislation referring these powers to the Commonwealth. South Australia introduced legislation referring powers to the Commonwealth into its House of Assembly earlier this week.

“The *Water Amendment Bill 2008* represents an historic agreement between the Australian Government and the Basin States, and will ensure the Basin can be managed in the shared national interest and on a sustainable basis into the future.

“It supports the Rudd Government’s \$12.9 billion Water for the Future plan, which prepares Australia for a future with a changing climate and less rainfall.

“We are investing \$3.1 billion in purchasing water entitlements, so water can be returned to our rivers to improve their health.

“We have committed a further \$5.8 billion towards making irrigation infrastructure more efficient and helping Basin communities adjust to the new limit on Basin water use.

“And we are investing in diversifying Australia’s water supply, through desalination, stormwater harvesting and recycling, so our communities rely less on rainfall.”