



Minutes

Unscheduled Council Meeting

Tuesday 28 April 2026

to be held at 1:00 PM

Council Chambers

Swan Hill Town Hall

53 – 57 McCallum Street, Swan Hill. VIC 3585

Confirmed 19 May 2026

Chairperson.....

Public Access

Open to the public and live streaming from
Council's website: www.swanhill.vic.gov.au



Vision Statement

Built on strong foundations that embrace our rich History and natural environment, our region will be a place of progressions and possibility. We are a community that is happy, healthy and harmonious - we are empowered, we are respectful and we are proud.

Our Mission

We will lead, advocate, partner and provide efficient services and opportunities for growth and the wellbeing of our community, environment and economy.

Our Values

Council values our residents and community and will be responsive to their needs. In pursuing our objectives, we believe in, and are committed to, the following values:

Community engagement - We will ensure that our communities are consulted, listened to and informed.

Leadership - We will be at the centre of our community and by actively engaging our community we will form the collective view on strategic issues and will then express our views through strong advocacy and action.

Fairness - We will value and embrace the diversity of our community and ensure that all people are treated equally.

Accountability - We will be transparent and efficient in our activities and we will always value feedback.

Trust - We will act with integrity and earn the community's trust by being a reliable partner in delivering services, projects and providing facilities.

Table of Contents

1 Procedural Matters	4
1.1 Welcome	4
1.2 Acknowledgement Of Country	4
1.3 Opening Declaration	4
1.4 Apologies / Leaves of Absence	4
1.5 Directors / Officers Present	4
1.6 Disclosures of Conflict of Interest	4
2 Officer Reports for Decision	5
2.1 Swan Hill Rural City Council - Murray Darling Basin Plan - Submission	5
3 Close of Meeting	25

1 Procedural Matters

1.1 Welcome

Mayor, Cr King assumed the chair and declared the Unscheduled Council Meeting - 28 April 2026 open at 1:00 pm

1.2 Acknowledgement Of Country

Mayor, Cr King read the Acknowledgement of Country.

"Swan Hill Rural City Council acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, and pays its respects to their elders, past and present."

1.3 Opening Declaration

Cr Thornton read the opening declaration.

"We, the Councillors of Swan Hill Rural City Council, declare that we will undertake the duties of the office of Councillor, in the best interests of our community, and faithfully, and impartially, carry out the functions, powers, authorities and discretions vested in us, to the best of our skill and judgement."

1.4 Apologies / Leaves of Absence

CM 2026/42 Motion

MOVED Cr Englefield

That the apology from Cr Rogers be accepted.

SECONDED Cr Broad

The Motion was put and CARRIED 6 / 0

1.5 Directors / Officers Present

Scott Barber, Chief Executive Officer
Leah Johnston, Director Infrastructure
Michelle Grainger, Director Development and Planning
Bruce Myers, Director of Community and Cultural Services
Stephen Fernando, Director of Corporate Services
Sharon Lindsay, Executive Assistant
Tamara Matthews, Executive Support

1.6 Disclosures of Conflict of Interest

Nil.

2 Officer Reports for Decision

2.1 Swan Hill Rural City Council - Murray Darling Basin Plan - Submission

Directorate: Chief Executive Officer

File Number: S14-22-21

Purpose: For Decision

Council Plan Strategy Addressed

6. Transparency and Effectiveness – Ensuring Council is open, accountable and responsive, with services and decision-making that reflect community expectations. Objective 6.2: Strengthen Council’s internal capability, resources, systems and financial sustainability.

6.2.1 Build internal capability and partnerships to meet evolving community needs.

Current Strategic Documents

Council Plan

Declarations of Interest

Council Officers affirm that no general or material conflicts need to be declared in relation to the subject of this report.

Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with the opportunity to consider and endorse a submission to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority’s 2026 Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper.

Discussion

The Basin Plan is currently under review by the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA). As part of this process, a discussion paper was released in early February 2026 and is seeking public feedback, closing on 1 May 2026.

A copy of the Discussion Paper can be found at [2026 Murray–Darling Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper](#)

The purpose of a submission is to examine ongoing community challenges and propose potential solutions considering affects to the whole community as a direct or indirect result of changes to the irrigation industry and environmental well-being of the riverine environment.

As the level of government closest to the community, Council sees firsthand how Basin policy settings affect households, farms, businesses, water-dependent recreation and the environment.

Local government is a critical partner to be consulted about the Basin Plan impact(s) on rural communities, effectiveness in practice, minimisation of socio-economic impacts and influencing required Federal Government support for industries that must transition because of these ongoing water reforms.

This review provides an opportunity to refine what has worked, address areas requiring improvement, and set a clear direction that supports healthy, working rivers alongside sustainable food and fibre production and thriving Basin communities, including those within the Swan Hill Rural City Council municipality.

Council's central position is that the Basin Plan must now shift from a focus on water volumes to an outcomes-based framework. Rather than measuring success by the volume of water recovered, the Plan must define clear, measurable ecological and socio-economic objectives and invest in the most cost-effective pathways to achieve them.

This approach aligns with Council's 2019 position that Basin management must be optimised to maximise benefits to communities, agriculture and the environment, supported by transparency in water markets, effective delivery of environmental water, and genuine consideration of socio-economic impacts.

Consultation

Council has been briefed on the submission, and the Mayor and CEO have had a range of meetings with key stakeholders along with Murray River Group of Councils during the last three months.

At the request of Council, the MDBA ran information sessions at Swan Hill for the community on 21 April 2026 and for Councillors on 22 April 2026.

Council was briefed by Goulburn-Murray (GMW) water regarding the Tresco, Nyah and Woorinen pumped and piped irrigation districts and the GMW submission to the MDBA's 2026 Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper on 14 April 2026.

Council was briefed by the Mallee CMA regarding Restoring Flows to the Mallee Floodplain Program 3 March 2026. The Program will upgrade existing environmental watering sites to efficiently return wet and dry cycles to 16 of the region's most ecologically and culturally significant wetlands and floodplains and effective water delivery to these key environmental sites along the Victorian Murray River.

Financial Implications

Time required by Council Officers to prepare the submission and related membership costs for the Murray River Group of Councils.

Social Implications

Council's submission highlights how the Basin Plan directly shapes community wellbeing, population stability and confidence, using experiences of the past, and looking into the future of water-dependent towns.

Changes to water availability, allocation reliability and water prices affect

- household incomes and household property values
- the composition and population of irrigation dominant communities
- agricultural industries, supply chains, individual farmers and reliable and secure food production
- associated businesses
- water-dependent recreation
- rural Councils; and
- the valued riverine environment - by our communities and visitors.

Economic and Environmental Implications

Holistic and balanced management of the Murray-Darling Basin for improved environmental, social and economic outcomes.

Risk Management Implications

Submissions by affected rural communities are required to advocate impacts to the local irrigated agricultural industries and highlight the interdependency for the broader communities. Otherwise, these impacts will not be reported to the Federal Government, as awareness beyond irrigation regions appears to be very low.

Attachments: 1. SHRCC BPR Submission Draft FINAL CM amendments
NEW [2.1.1 - 16 pages]

Options

1. Council endorse the submission to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority's 2026 Basin Plan Review.
2. Council endorse the submission to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority's 2026 Basin Plan Review with amendments.
3. Council does not endorse the submission to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority's 2026 Basin Plan Review.

Recommendation/s

That Council endorse the submission to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority's 2026 Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper.

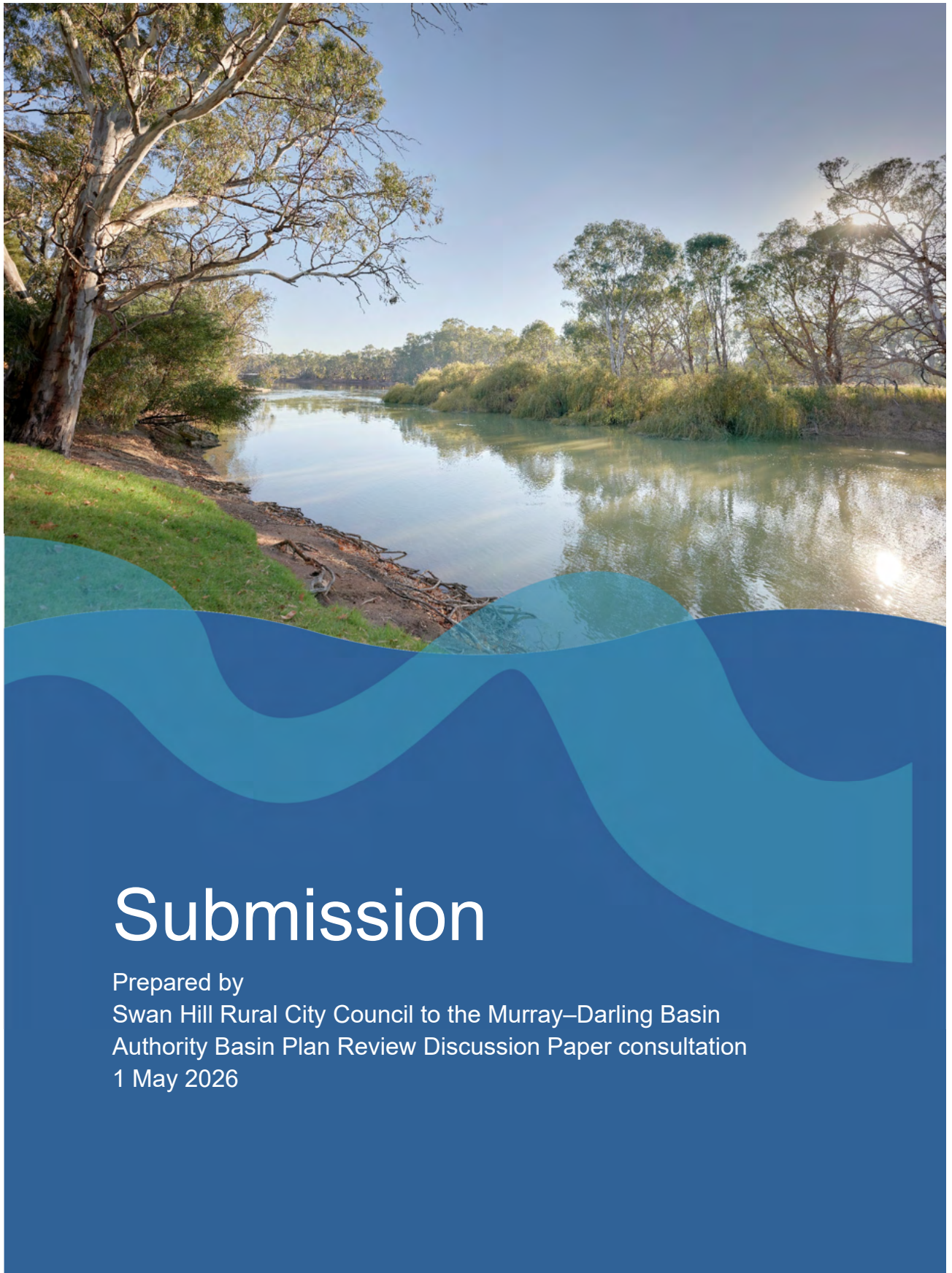
CM 2026/43 Motion**MOVED Cr McPhee**

That Council endorse the submission to the Murray–Darling Basin Authority’s 2026 Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper with the following amendments;

- **Add to Recommendation 6A an additional line – “For example, the Barmah Choke requires urgent attention to maintain flowrates and return to its original flow capacity, for the benefit of the mid and Lower Murray River System.”**
- **Remove from Recommendation 12 – “not in conflict”.**
- **Add to Recommendation 9 an additional line – “Federal Financial support should be provided to the Nyah, Tresco and Woorinen Pumped and Piped Irrigation Schemes. These schemes are providing efficient irrigation supply and therefore have not attracted funds for irrigation system modernisation and upgrades as have the gravity irrigation systems within the Basin.”**
- **Add the 3 resolutions from 10 September 2024.**

SECONDED Cr Thornton

The Motion was put and CARRIED 6 / 0



Submission

Prepared by
Swan Hill Rural City Council to the Murray–Darling Basin
Authority Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper consultation
1 May 2026



Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission on the Murray–Darling Basin Plan Review 2026.

This Review is a rare and important opportunity for all Basin governments, Commonwealth, State and Local, alongside communities, Traditional Owners and industries, to shape the Basin Plan into an effective and enduring water management framework for the decade ahead.

Swan Hill Rural City Council approaches this process with a clear message: the future health of our rivers and wetlands, and the social and economic prosperity of the people and businesses who depend on them, are inseparable.

As the level of government closest to the community, Council sees firsthand how Basin policy settings affect households, farms, businesses, water-dependent recreation and the environment. Local government is a critical partner in making the Basin Plan work, not just on paper, but in practice.

This Review is Australia's chance to refine what has worked, fix what has not, and set a confident direction that delivers healthy, working rivers alongside sustainable food and fibre production and thriving Basin communities, including those across the Swan Hill Rural City Council.

[signed]

Mayor, Cr Stuart King
Swan Hill Rural City Council

About Swan Hill Rural City Council

Swan Hill Rural City Council is located in north-west Victoria within the Murray–Darling Basin with a population exceeding 21,000 people, covering more than 6000km² and generating an agricultural economic output of \$1 Billion.

The Murray River provides extensive river frontage to the municipality and supports major irrigation districts, internationally significant environmental assets and water-based tourism and recreation.

Council represents a diverse set of communities including Swan Hill, Robinvale, Lake Boga, Nyah, Nyah West, Piangil, Woorinen, Ultima, Manangatang, Boundary Bend and Tresco, as well as surrounding rural districts.

Our economy is strongly connected to irrigated agriculture and food production, including high-value horticulture, which in turn requires reliable and affordable access to water, efficient river operations and a healthy river system.

In October 2019 Council adopted its *Management of the Murray–Darling Basin – Position Paper*, setting out principles and calls to action to ensure Basin management provides water for agricultural production, supports a healthy ecosystem, enables recreation and sustains the Basin's towns.

This submission draws on the evidence and offers recommendations that align with Council's longstanding position that Basin reform must be practical, transparent, and focused on outcomes - environmental, social and economic. It also aligns with the Submission from the Murray River Group of Councils.

Council supports a balanced implementation of the Basin Plan that achieves environmental outcomes while maintaining strong, viable irrigation communities and regional industries.

Executive Summary

The Murray Darling Basin faces a clear and pressing challenge: to reduce ecological stress while supporting the economies and communities who depend on the Basin, and to adapt to a drying climate marked by declining rainfall and inflows.

After more than a decade of water reform, felt most acutely in northern Victoria, Basin communities are seeking stability, certainty and consolidation.

Council approaches this Review with a clear message: the future health of our rivers and the economic prosperity of the people who depend on them, are inseparable.

The Water Recovery Phase is Essentially Complete.

Council's local priorities for the Swan Hill Local Government Area (LGA) are to:

- protect the viability of irrigation-dependent industries and jobs in the Mallee and LMW region;
- prioritise environmental outcomes through constraints relaxation, enhancing deliverability, river operations and complementary works, opposing further non-strategic entitlement recovery;
- ensure constraints and works programs proceed only where risks to landholders and communities are managed, and value for money is demonstrated;
- improve transparency and accountability for environmental watering outcomes and water market settings; and
- secure long-term transition and resilience investment for communities experiencing cumulative impacts.

From volumes to outcomes and making the most of every drop

Council's central position is that the Basin Plan must now shift from a focus on water volumes to an outcomes-based framework. Rather than measuring success by the volume of water recovered, the Plan must define clear, measurable ecological and socio-economic objectives and invest in the most cost-effective pathways to achieve them.

This approach aligns with Council's 2019 position that Basin management must be optimised to maximise benefits to communities, agriculture and the environment, supported by transparency in water markets, effective delivery of environmental water, and genuine consideration of socio-economic impacts.

A shift to an outcome focus would unlock a range of improvements that the current framework cannot deliver.

The pathway forward is clear: move from a focus on water recovery volumes to measurable outcomes; maximise the value of the water already recovered; recognise and invest in the communities and industries that underpin the Basin; and enable locally led, flexible solutions within a clear Basin-wide framework. A revised Basin Plan that adopts this approach will deliver more effective environmental outcomes, stronger regional communities and better value for public investment.

Local priorities for Swan Hill Rural City Council (supporting MRGC)

- **A long-term future for irrigated agriculture in the Lower Murray:** ensure the long-term future viability of irrigation in our LGA by investing in system reconfiguration projects, river operations and avoiding policy settings that further tighten an already constrained consumptive pool in dry years.
- **Environmental water deliverability:** prioritise river operations, constraints management and targeted works so environmental water achieves measurable outcomes in the places it can be delivered effectively.
- **Transparency and confidence:** strengthen public reporting on environmental watering outcomes and improve transparency in water markets to maintain community confidence.
- **Socio-economic impacts and resilience:** recognise cumulative, localised impacts and back communities with long-term transition and resilience investment.

DRAFT

		Summary of Recommendations	
No.	Topic	Recommendation	Rationale
1	Review process	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that MDBA undertakes targeted consultation with stakeholders on draft Basin Plan Review recommendations prior to finalising the Review Report and providing it to governments.	The current process does not provide an opportunity to comment on draft MDBA recommendations. A second, targeted consultation would allow the Authority to test its proposed changes and build stakeholder understanding.
2	Outcomes-Based Framework	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Basin Plan Review adopts an outcomes-based framework, with clear, measurable ecological and socio-economic objectives replacing the current volumetric focus as the primary driver of future policy and investment decisions.	The Discussion Paper shows that further water recovery alone will deliver marginal environmental benefits. An outcomes-based framework improves transparency on what can be achieved, where, and at what cost, and supports locally tailored solutions and investment.
3	Sustainable Diversion Limits	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) not be changed, as further water recovery cannot be justified at this time on environmental grounds.	MDBA's own SDL assessments demonstrate that recovering an additional 300GL — or the full 450GL shortfall — does not change the likelihood of achieving environmental outcomes. Frontier Economics analysis confirms a 'mixed response pathway' is required, not further volumetric SDL change.
4	Water Purchase Programs	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that current water purchase programs be suspended and that funding be redirected to enable the efficient delivery and use of the environmental water already held.	The available evidence indicates we have reached the practical limits of useable environmental water under current system constraints. Further buybacks reduce irrigated production and community viability without achieving commensurate ecological outcomes.
5	Complementary Non-Flow Actions	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Basin Plan embeds integrated catchment land and water planning and investment in complementary non-flow actions to maximise the benefit of deliverable environmental water.	Actions such as riparian revegetation, fish passage, cold water pollution management, invasive species control and drainage management multiply the ecological value of held environmental water while rebuilding social and economic capital in regional communities.

		Summary of Recommendations	
No.	Topic	Recommendation	Rationale
6A	Constraints	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that Basin Governments methodically progress constraints relaxation to reconnect rivers with their floodplains where environmental outcomes will be achieved and value for money and community support can be demonstrated. For example, the Barmah Choke requires urgent attention to maintain flowrates and return to its original flow capacity, for the benefit of the mid and Lower Murray River System	Constraints relaxation must be staged, community-supported, cost-effective and underpinned by robust legal, compensation and governance frameworks.
6B	SDLAM Projects	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that Basin Governments complete SDLAM projects where value for money and community support can be demonstrated.	SDLAM and Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Projects must receive full funding with extended legislative timelines where projects provide value for money.
7	Environmental Watering Toolkit	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Water Act and Basin Plan be amended to provide environmental water holders with a more mature and flexible toolkit — including outcomes-based valuation, greater allocation trading, and more responsive operational settings.	The rules and frameworks within which environmental watering is managed have not kept pace with the scale of the environmental water portfolio. Greater allocation trading flexibility and improved delivery rules would enable more responsive and ecologically effective watering strategies.
8	Environmental Water Asset Leverage	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the environmental water portfolio be managed to generate a financial return that can be reinvested in environmental outcomes, river operations and complementary measures.	Even a conservative return on the \$11 billion environmental water portfolio would provide governments with tens of millions of dollars annually to invest in communities, aging water infrastructure and programs enabling water delivery to environmental assets — without further public expenditure on entitlement purchase.
9	Socio-Economic Impact Recognition	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Review formally recognises the cumulative, lagged and ongoing nature of socio-economic impacts of water recovery on communities, and that the Basin Plan be amended to include explicit	Basin-wide averages can mask impacts in irrigation-dependent LGAs. Council supports monitoring and reporting socio-economic impacts at an appropriate

		Summary of Recommendations	
No.	Topic	Recommendation	Rationale
		commitments to monitor, report on and respond to these impacts (including at the LGA scale). "Federal Financial support should be provided to the Nyah, Tresco and Woorinen Pumped and Piped Irrigation Schemes. These schemes are providing efficient irrigation supply and therefore have not attracted funds for irrigation system modernisation and upgrades as have the gravity irrigation systems within the Basin."	local scale, including for the Mallee and Lower Murray.
10	Basin Community Transition Fund	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Australian Government establish a permanent, legislated Basin Community and Industry Transition Fund to support communities and industries affected by the long-term impacts of Basin Plan water recovery.	One-off adjustment programs have proven insufficient. The structural, cumulative and long-term nature of impacts — including lost jobs, dairy processor closures and population decline — requires a durable mechanism modelled on the Future Drought Fund, providing stable annual funding guided by a statutory plan.
11	Securing the Future of Irrigation in Northern Victoria	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Basin Plan be amended to support the future of irrigated agriculture including incorporating the principles and priority projects of the Victorian Basin Plan Prospectus	The future of our region depends on a long-term viable future for irrigated agriculture. The Victorian Prospectus sets out principles and projects that, if funded and implemented would enable irrigators and communities to shape a fit for purpose irrigation system to underpin food production for the future.
12	Food Security for a Nation	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Australian Government ensure that the Basin Plan and the government's Food Security Strategy are aligned and complimentary.	The Federal Government through the review of the Basin plan can redress balance between communities, environment and security of food supply.

Introduction

The Murray Darling Basin faces a clear and pressing challenge: to reduce stress on ecological systems, support the economies and vulnerable communities who live in and rely on the Basin, and adapt to a drying climate marked by declining rainfall and inflows.

After decades of water reform, felt most acutely in northern Victoria, communities are now seeking stability, business and social certainty and the consolidation of existing changes.

Council shares the Murray–Darling Basin Authority's (MDBA's) view that the Basin Plan's overarching aim must be healthy, working rivers. This Review is an important opportunity to ensure the Plan evolves to deliver that balance in a drying climate.

Council's longstanding position (2019) and its relevance to the Review

In 2019, Swan Hill Rural City Council adopted a position paper on Murray–Darling Basin management. While the Basin Plan Review is necessarily forward-looking, Council submits that the core issues identified in 2019 remain material today and should be directly addressed in the revised Basin Plan and associated implementation settings.

Council's 2019 position is that Basin management should be optimised to maximise benefits to:

- agricultural production (including high-value horticulture and associated processing);
- a healthy river and wetland ecosystem;
- a range of recreational pursuits; and
- the many urban communities within the Basin.

Council further noted concerns that continue to resonate in 2026, including: insufficient consideration of socio-economic impacts; buyback practices that can threaten irrigation district and community viability; operational and physical constraints that can limit the deliverability and effectiveness of environmental water; the need for greater transparency in water markets; better public reporting on the use and outcomes of environmental water; and the importance of regulatory settings that protect investment in high-value permanent plantings within an already constrained system.

The recommendations in this submission reinforce and extend those 2019 priorities by shifting the Basin Plan's emphasis from additional entitlement recovery toward measurable outcomes, system effectiveness, transparent trade-offs, and long-term investment in communities that carry the impacts of reform.

Resolutions from Scheduled Council Meeting - 10 September 2024

5.1 Prevent Further Fish Deaths - Improve Seasonal River Flows

1. To express support for the Constraints Relaxation Program in both the Victorian and NSW river systems and encourage that the program rollout be expedited for the benefit of downstream communities: to enable more efficient use of environmental water; to

mitigate floods; to protect entitlement by reducing spill events; and to enable the agreed SDL adjustment related to this project.

2. To express support for moderately increasing flow levels above current practice, to maintain water quality, and support the environment of the Mid-Murray, where there will not be an impact on private land, as is suggested is viable under the Constraints Relaxation Feasibility study, and by coordinating tributary flows through the Commonwealth Enhanced Environmental Water Delivery project.

5.2 Equity and Better Outcomes from the Basin Plan

That the Commonwealth Government make a commitment to ensuring that the Murrumbidgee and Darling River systems make an ongoing and reliable contribution to environmental flows to support the connectivity and water quality of the Lower Darling and Lower Murrumbidgee, the health of the entire Murray Darling, and to ensure equitable water recovery from all regions.

5.3 Impacts of Water Buybacks

That Council continue to advocate against the implications of Current and Future open market Water Buy Backs within the Swan Hill Rural City irrigated farming areas through the Murray River Group of Councils and any other meetings with Federal Government politicians or officers.

[Link to Scheduled Council Meeting minutes – 10 September 2024](#)

A Note on the Process

The Review process as designed does not provide an opportunity to comment on the MDBA's draft recommendations for changes to the Basin Plan that arise from the Review and the initial 12-week engagement.

Council supports revising the process so that the MDBA publishes a draft Basin Plan Review Report (including draft recommendations) and undertakes a second, targeted consultation with affected stakeholders before finalising advice to governments.

This would allow the Authority to test proposed changes, improve stakeholder understanding, and refine recommendations based on practical feedback from communities and industries across the Basin.

REC 1

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that MDBA undertakes targeted consultation with stakeholders on draft Basin Plan Review recommendations prior to finalising the Review Report and providing it to governments.

1. From Volumes to Outcomes

Council supports an outcomes-based Basin Plan that defines what success looks like for rivers, wetlands and communities, and measures progress transparently.

In the Lower Murray, constraints on delivery, operational settings, and complementary site works can limit the environmental outcomes achievable from held environmental water. The next phase of the Plan should prioritise overcoming these constraints.

An outcomes focus would better support integrated catchment actions (such as riparian and habitat works, fish passage and water quality improvement) and clearer decision-making about trade-offs in a more water-scarce future.

- locally tailored ecological targets and monitoring
- investment in complementary works that improve outcomes per megalitre delivered
- more flexible operations and tools for environmental water holders to respond to seasonal conditions

REC 2

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Basin Plan Review adopts an outcomes-based framework, with clear, measurable ecological and socio-economic objectives replacing the current volumetric focus as the primary driver of future policy and investment decisions.

2. Enough is Enough

Evidence considered through the Basin Plan Evaluation and the MDBA's initial SDL assessments indicates that additional entitlement recovery is unlikely to materially improve environmental outcomes. For Swan Hill Rural City Council, the priority is now to maximise the ecological benefit of environmental water already held - while avoiding further harm to irrigated industries and communities in the Mallee and Lower Murray.

The water recovery phase is effectively complete - focus must shift to outcomes

Council supports retaining existing SDL settings and shifting effort to a mixed response pathway that improves outcomes through delivery, operations, habitat and water quality actions.

REC 3

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDLs) not be changed, as further water recovery cannot be justified at this time on environmental grounds.

3. Make the Most of Every Drop

Council supports redirecting Basin effort from additional recovery to improving the deliverability and effectiveness of environmental water in the Lower Murray through complementary environmental actions, staged constraints relaxation, SDLAM and other environmental watering infrastructure projects and an enhanced environmental watering toolkit.

REC 4	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that current water purchase programs be suspended and that funding be redirected to enable the efficient delivery and use of the environmental water already held.
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Complementary environmental actions

Complementary, non-flow actions are essential to achieving lasting environmental outcomes in the Murray River system. They must be prioritised and funded in the next phase of the Plan.

These include:

- Riparian revegetation and riverine fencing
- Fish passage infrastructure and habitat restoration
- Water quality improvements, including cold water pollution reduction
- Eradication of carp and other invasive species
- Integrated land and water planning that supports locally led solutions

Swan Hill Rural City Council has long advocated for more local input into environmental watering decisions and greater transparency on environmental outcomes. Complementary actions offer a pathway to better ecological results while reducing dependence on water volume alone.

REC 5	Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Basin Plan embeds integrated catchment land and water planning and investment in complementary non-flow actions to maximise the benefit of deliverable environmental water.
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Staged Constraints Relaxation

Swan Hill Rural City Council supports progressing constraints relaxation where it is proven to provide the desired environmental outcomes, supported by affected communities, demonstrably cost-effective and underpinned by robust legal and compensation frameworks that manage landowner risk before any operational changes occur.

Our community lives with the consequences of changed flow regimes. Reconnecting floodplain ecosystems with rivers is a long-term task that will take at least another decade to progress responsibly. Any approach must be staged and carefully targeted.

Relaxing constraints is a critical step in making the most of the water that has been recovered. Council supports a deliberate, staged and carefully targeted approach, that demonstrably delivers environmental outcomes, represents value for money, and maintains the confidence of the communities who live with the consequences.

Piped districts in our LGA are currently undertaking a Future Services Strategy with Goulburn Murray Water. Support from the Victorian Government in line with Prospectus and the Federal Government through transition funds, would ensure continuing infrastructure that is fit for and a water future co-designed by local communities.

REC 6A

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that Basin Governments methodically progress constraints relaxation to reconnect rivers with their floodplains where environmental outcomes will be achieved and value for money and community support can be demonstrated. For example, the Barmah Choke requires urgent attention to maintain flowrates and return to its original flow capacity, for the benefit of the mid and Lower Murray River System.

Completion of SDLAM and Water Infrastructure Projects

Several key Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) projects in Victoria are at risk of not being completed within arbitrary Commonwealth timelines and have not received funding as a result. Swan Hill Rural City Council strongly supports amending legislative timelines and investing in the full suite of Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Projects (VMFRP) and other SDLAM infrastructure.

These projects have demonstrated the ability to deliver equivalent or improved environmental outcomes with less water. Recent independent analysis confirms that easing constraints alone would not meet ecological objectives at VMFRP sites — the projects themselves are required. They are essential to restore the ecological health of waterways and wetlands in our region.

REC 6B

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that Basin Governments complete SDLAM projects where value for money and community support can be demonstrated.

An Enhanced Environmental Watering Toolkit

The current operational framework for environmental water holders has restrictions limiting the effective use of the \$11 Billion held environmental water portfolio.

Council supports modernising the environmental watering toolkit so environmental water holders can manage held water efficiently, respond to seasonal conditions, and maximise outcomes within delivery constraints.

This would include watering environment at the right time, using the allocation market to provide flexibility to meet seasonal environmental needs and creation of social licence through local benefits for all water users.

REC 7

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Water Act and Basin Plan be amended to provide environmental water holders with a more mature and flexible toolkit — including outcomes-based valuation, greater allocation trading, and more responsive operational settings.

REC 8

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the environmental water portfolio be managed to generate a financial return that can be reinvested in environmental outcomes, river operations and complementary measures.

4. Impacts Are Real and Ongoing

Council considers the social and economic impacts of Basin Plan water recovery require stronger recognition in the Review, including clearer reporting at the local government area (LGA) scale.

In the Lower Murray and Mallee, communities with high water purchase activity and limited trade offsets, including Swan Hill Rural City Council's communities, have experienced employment and business impacts over time. Council's priority is that future Basin Plan settings do not add to these pressures and that impacts are monitored and responded to transparently at the LGA level.

Regional Community Resilience Is Finite

Council notes that regional resilience is a real but finite asset. Repeated shocks and long-running adjustment pressures can erode adaptive capacity over time, affecting local services, volunteer capacity, and economic confidence.

Many irrigation communities have already absorbed substantial adjustment through prior buybacks, structural change, and ongoing water availability and price variability. Vulnerability indicators suggest that Murray River Group of Councils LGAs combine high sensitivity and high vulnerability with limited adaptive capacity — further water recovery could be a tipping point for significant regional challenges.

ABARES community vulnerability framework (Swan Hill)

LGA	Adaptive Capacity	Baseline Vulnerability	Sensitivity
Swan Hill	Low (0.21)	High (0.67)	High (0.57)

Note: To classify each LGA as Low, Medium or High, the 148 LGAs were ranked for each indicator and split into three equal groups. For Adaptive capacity, this means a 'Low' rating (0.0000 – 0.2729) indicates an LGA sits among the LGAs with the lowest Adaptive Capacity in the entire basin. For Vulnerability, a 'High' rating (0.5446 – 1.0000) indicates an LGA sits among the most vulnerable third of all Basin LGAs. Similarly, for Sensitivity, a 'High' rating (0.4236 – 1.0000) indicates an LGA sits among the most sensitive third of all Basin LGAs. Colour coding has been used: Green - Positive (high adaptive capacity OR low vulnerability/sensitivity); Yellow - Moderate concern; Red - Area of concern (low adaptive capacity OR high vulnerability/sensitivity).

Source: Frontier Economics analysis of ABARES community vulnerability framework

For Swan Hill, the ABARES framework indicates high sensitivity and baseline vulnerability combined with low adaptive capacity. Council considers this reinforces the need for Basin Plan decisions to explicitly consider local socio-economic risk and avoid further destabilising impacts from additional recovery measures.

REC 9

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Review formally recognises the cumulative, lagged and ongoing nature of socio-economic impacts of water recovery on communities, and that the Basin Plan be amended to include explicit commitments to monitor, report on and respond to these impacts (including at the LGA scale). "Federal Financial support should be provided to the Nyah, Tresco and Woorinen Pumped and Piped Irrigation Schemes. These schemes are providing efficient irrigation supply and therefore have not attracted funds for irrigation system modernisation and upgrades as have the gravity irrigation systems within the Basin."

5. Thriving Communities and Sustainable Agriculture

Council supports a Basin Plan that explicitly recognises the importance of sustainable irrigated production and regional communities to Basin outcomes.

One-off adjustment programs have proven insufficient to address the structural and cumulative effects of water buybacks on our economy, industry and community.

To ensure the Basin Plan genuinely strengthens regional Australia, it must explicitly embed clear objectives to maintain regional economic resilience, protect the long-term viability of domestic food and fibre production, and deliver fair outcomes for Basin communities, recognising that strong communities and sustainable agriculture underpin the Basin's future.

Swan Hill Rural City Council strongly supports the creation of a permanent, legislated Basin Community and Industry Transition Fund, modelled on the Future Drought Fund.

REC 10

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Australian Government establish a permanent, legislated Basin Community and Industry Transition Fund to support communities and industries affected by the long-term impacts of Basin Plan water recovery.

6. Securing the Future of Irrigation in Northern Victoria

The Basin Plan must include specific, targeted actions to support irrigated food production and the communities that depend on it. This includes incorporating the principles and priority projects identified in the Victorian Basin Plan Prospectus, which provide a clear, regionally grounded pathway for adaptation.

Local, community-led solutions will be critical to reshaping irrigated food producing districts so they are fit for the future. This includes reconfiguring infrastructure, supporting transitions where irrigation is no longer viable, and investing in new opportunities for economic diversification.

REC 11

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Basin Plan be amended to support the future of irrigated agriculture including incorporating the principles and priority projects of the Victorian Basin Plan Prospectus

7. Food Security for a Nation

The Commonwealth is currently developing a National Food Security Strategy. The Basin Plan must take this into consideration and not continue with contradictory actions (such as further Buy Backs) that will add more pressure to agricultural food and fibre production.

Reduced production and diversity of commodities increases Australia's reliance on imported food. This increases food insecurity and leaves us open to supply chain interruption as was experienced during the pandemic and is currently being felt due to the oil crisis.

REC 12

Council (supporting MRGC) recommends that the Australian Government ensure that the Basin Plan and the government's Food Security Strategy are aligned and complimentary.

8. Conclusion

The Basin Plan Review provides a critical opportunity to reset the approach to Basin management.

The pathway forward is clear: move from a focus on water recovery volumes to measurable outcomes; maximise the value of the water already recovered; recognise and invest in the communities and industries that underpin the Basin; and enable locally led, flexible solutions within a clear Basin-wide framework.

Council urges the MDBA and Basin governments to adopt our recommendations in a way that reflects local deliverability and protects the social and economic fabric of irrigation-dependent communities in the Mallee and Lower Murray. Council welcomes further engagement as draft recommendations are developed.

A revised Basin Plan that adopts this approach will deliver more effective environmental outcomes, stronger regional communities and better value for public investment.

Council would welcome the opportunity to discuss Swan Hill's local priorities and our recommendations outlined in this submission.

For further information, please contact: Scott Barber, CEO Swan Hill Rural City Council.

3 Close of Meeting

There being no further business the Mayor, Cr King closed the meeting at 1:18 pm.