

# Murray Darling Basin Plan Review

*A perspective by  
David Boyd*

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PROBUS · 11 May 2026



*The Darling River in flood at Bourke.*

# In the next 10 minutes

**01 Measurements & Definitions**

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**02 Geography**

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**03 Natural Characteristics & Variability**

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**04 Human Characteristics** - The Illusion of Control • Blame

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**05 History** - The Plan • Political Football • Snowy Scheme • Deception

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## MEASUREMENTS & DEFINITIONS

# The Murray Darling Basin by the numbers

### GEOGRAPHIC

**1.06M**

Square kilometres

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One-seventh (14%) of Australia.  
Spans QLD, NSW, ACT, VIC and SA.

### WATER VOLUMES

**1GL = 1,000ML**

1ML = 1,000 Litres

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Sydney Harbour is generally rounded to 500,000ML (500GL) in volume.

**1 Gallon = 3.785411784 L**

### PRODUCTION

**30%**

Irrigated share of production value

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Only 3% of the Basin is given over to irrigated agriculture by area.

### MILLENNIUM DROUGHT

**1996 - 2010**

Bloody bad drought!

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Water shortages erroneously blamed on "over-allocation and mismanagement"

### WATER FLOWS

**~13,700**

Gigalitres (GL) / year average inflow

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Highly variable - drought years can be a fraction of this.

### POLITICAL REASONING

**\$10B**

Howard Gov spend on the MDB

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Seeking 'Green' votes, the Coalition reviews prior initiatives to tighten water regulation for irrigation.

## GEOGRAPHY

# Economics of the Geography

The word "Basin" is misleading.

Only 3% of the land is irrigated and 97% of the land is dry-land farming.

**That 3% accounts for 30% of the production value.**

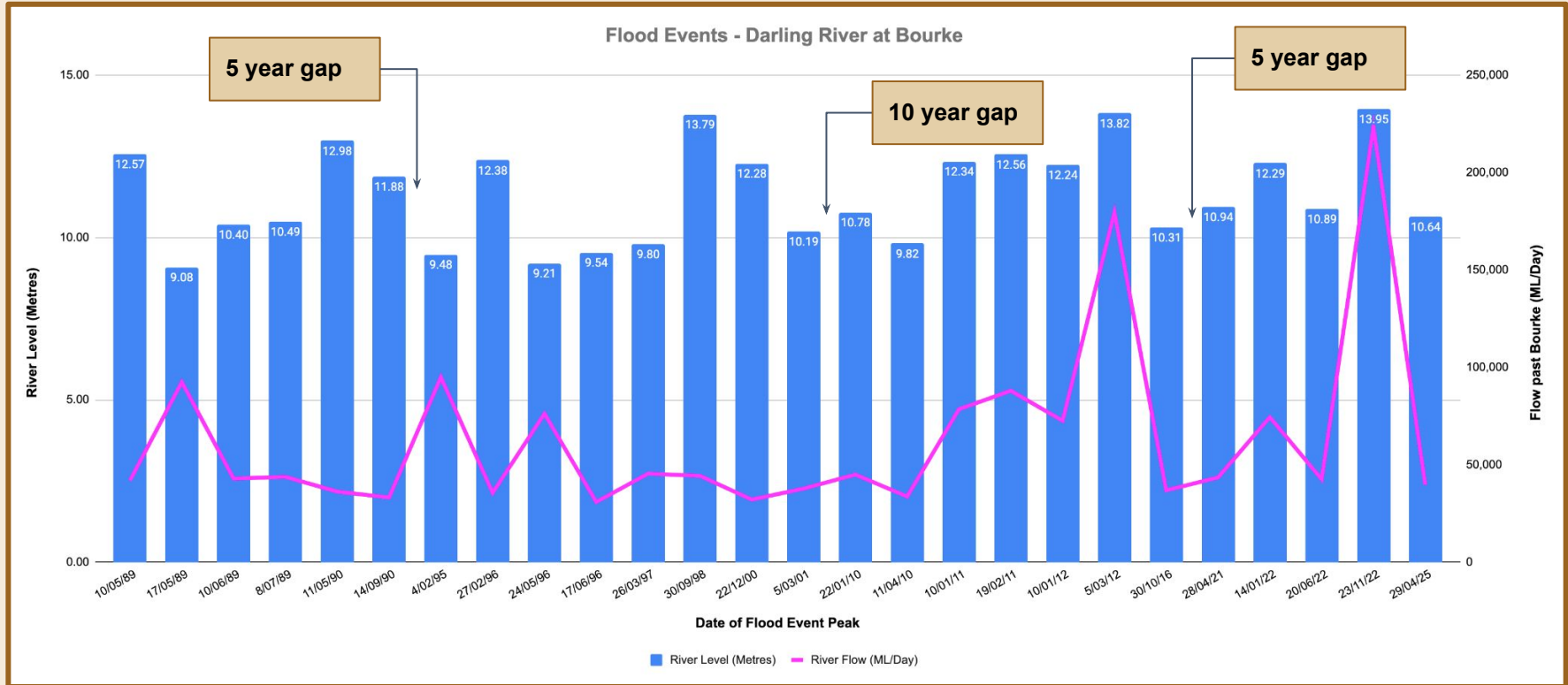
70% of the productive value does not come from irrigation.





## NATURAL CHARACTERISTICS

# Historical flows of the Darling past Bourke



# Entitlements and Allocations

## ENTITLEMENT

A long-term right to an Allocation  
(if there is one!)

A perpetual licence to a share of available water. These can be traded.

## ALLOCATION

The actual volume of the  
Entitlement that may be pumped

Announced each water year as a percentage of the entitlement - usually progressively - based on water availability. These can also be traded.

## HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS

- The Illusion of Control
- Blame

## HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS

# The drive from Wilcannia to Bourke



*"The river is dry in Wilcannia..."*



*"...but the storages upstream in Bourke are full!"*

*(13,300ML capacity covering 900 acres and 3.5m deep)*

## HISTORY

# Major regulatory events in the Basin

01 The Cap

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02 National Water Initiative

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03 The Murray Darling Basin Plan - specifically excludes the Snowy Scheme

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## HISTORY

# The Plan - A \$10B Political Football

- 01 Single Figure - Sustainable Diversion Limits (CSIRO)
- 02 Chasing Green preferences (Howard & Heffernan)
- 03 Phantom Water - Government buying Entitlements before Allocations
- 04 Federal Government gaining power over the States - International Agreements

HISTORY

# What do you see?

The Australian Magazine, Feb 2026



## HISTORY

# Political deception and original sin

01 Professor John Briscoe (Harvard)

*“The Water Act 2007 was founded on  
a political deception.*

*I would urge the Government to start again.”*