

Fish and flows key to future of the upper 'Bidgee

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Representatives from conservation groups, NSW and ACT state governments and the community came together in Canberra recently to discuss the future of the upper Murrumbidgee River – the often-forgotten headwaters of Australia's second longest river and one of the most iconic waterways in the Murray Darling Basin.

Led by the Upper Murrumbidgee Demonstration Reach (UMDR), the one-day 'Fish and Flows' forum highlighted the great work being done by range of stakeholders to recover native fish populations and improve the overall health of the upper 'Bidgee. However, it is also made clear that the upper 'Bidgee is at risk of being left behind by water legislation and flow management compromising the river's social, cultural and ecological values.

UMDR Facilitator Antia Brademann said the forum was about getting stakeholders together to share their work, gain greater understanding of the key issues faced by the river and discuss opportunities for ongoing collaboration. The initiative is part of the UMDR's Upper Murrumbidgee Recovery Reach project funded by Murray Darling Basin Authority under the Native Fish Recovery Strategy.

"The upper 'Bidgee flows through two state jurisdictions and what happens upstream has flow on effects for what happens downstream. It is critical that all stakeholders work together to address threats including flow management if we want to ensure we have a thriving river system providing healthy habitat for native fish and other native species long into the future," Brademann said.

The forum heard that current flow management arrangements allow 96% of headwater flows to be extracted at Tantangara Dam, as part of the Snowy Hydro Scheme. As a result, the flows in the upper Murrumbidgee are well below the scientifically accepted level required to maintain a healthy river ecosystem.

Monitoring data presented at the forum showed how parts of the river ran dry during the 2019/2020 Black Summer with critical water shortages and algal blooms experienced by local communities. Concerns were raised that in the future such events could also impact native fish.

The Murray Darling Basin Plan aims to ensure sustainable and equitable water management across state jurisdictions. Respective state government are currently drafting Water Resource (and associated water sharing) Plans and once accredited, these water plans will be the principle mechanisms to achieve objectives sought by the Basin Plan.

Brademann said that the Murrumbidgee Water Resource Plan currently being drafted was an opportunity to create more sustainable water flows in the upper Murrumbidgee and ensure that the hard work being done by a huge range of stakeholders to recover native fish and improve river health are not compromised.

"Flow management in the upper 'Bidgee is complex, involving two state jurisdictions and the Snowy Hydro Scheme, but sometimes it feels like it's all just put in the 'too-hard' basket. We've already lost several fish species from the upper 'Bidgee since European colonisation and we can't afford to lose anymore," Brademann said.