



Australian Government



Inspector-
General of
Water
Compliance

Murray–Darling Basin community perceptions research 2022

Perceptions relating to water management
in the Murray—Darling Basin

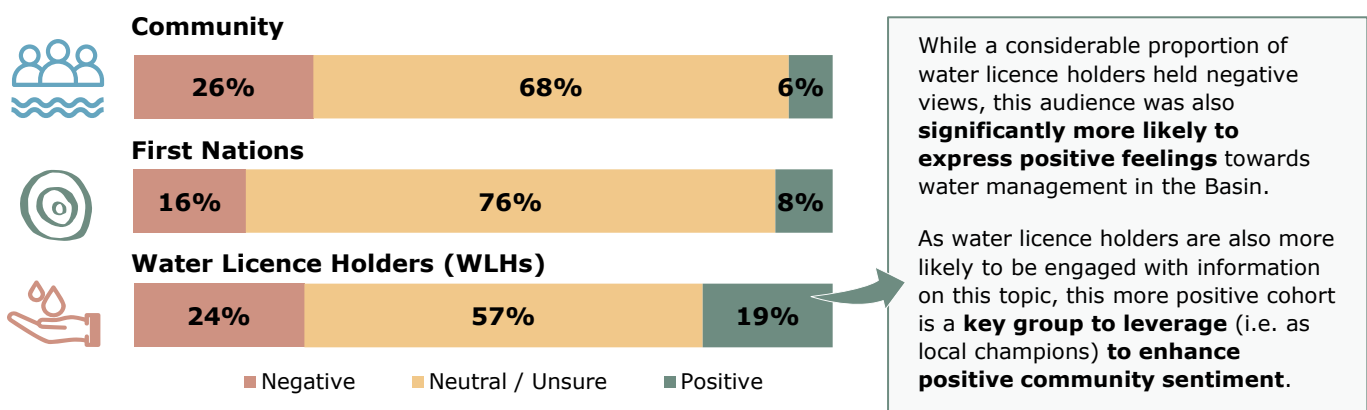


Perceptions of water management



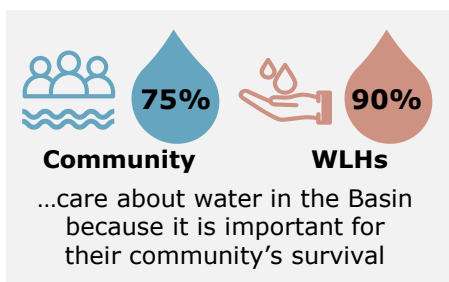
Top concerns in water management in the Basin were found to relate to the distribution and allocation of water, sustainability of the system for the future, including extreme weather events, and the environment. There were strong emotions associated with compliance, with most community members and water licence holders reporting they get angry with those who do not follow the rules. There was also a perception that people often took more water than they are allowed to.

Feelings towards the management of water in the Basin...

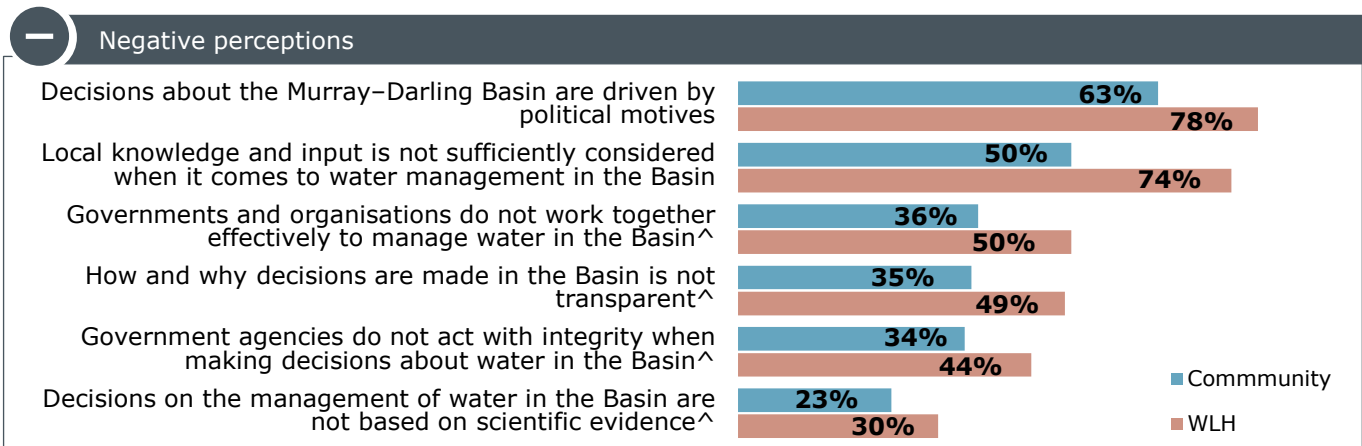


Q17. On a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' is extremely negative, and '10' is extremely positive, based on what you know, how would you rate your feelings about the management of water in the Basin...? Negative = 1-3, Neutral = 4-7, Positive = 8-10. Base: Community (n=817), First Nations (n=56), WLH (n=200).

Perceptions of water management



- +** Positive perceptions (identified via qualitative research)
- ✓ There is an **overarching plan** for water management in the Basin to **ensure longevity of water resources.**
 - ✓ **Environmental flows** have **improved biodiversity** and **water quality.**
 - ✓ Water management encourages **greater water efficiency** in agricultural and irrigation decisions and practices (e.g. drip irrigation, more efficient crops and crop variation).



Q25. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Murray–Darling Basin, in general. Base: Community (n=817), WLH (n=200). Note: ^ indicates that wording shown to respondents was phrased positively for that statement (e.g. "Governments and organisations work together effectively to manage water in the Basin"), with the total disagree result shown above. Otherwise, the total agree result is shown above.

Drivers and indicators



Respondents thought there was currently not enough information available and most wanted to know more about water rules, regulations and enforcement in the Basin – indicative of an appetite for more communications and engagement on the topic. In addition, many did not know where to go to find information, and most did not find it easy to understand the water rules and regulations – contributing to misperceptions in water management.

Underlying drivers for perceptions of water management

The qualitative and quantitative research found that perceptions of water management were driven by a range of factors. These can be leveraged to enhance positive perceptions (but the absence of these is also driving negative perceptions):



Feeling informed/ having a good understanding of the topic, as well as access to trusted sources of information



Being aware of positive outcomes/ hearing positive stories about the Basin



Having trust and confidence in decision-making and management processes

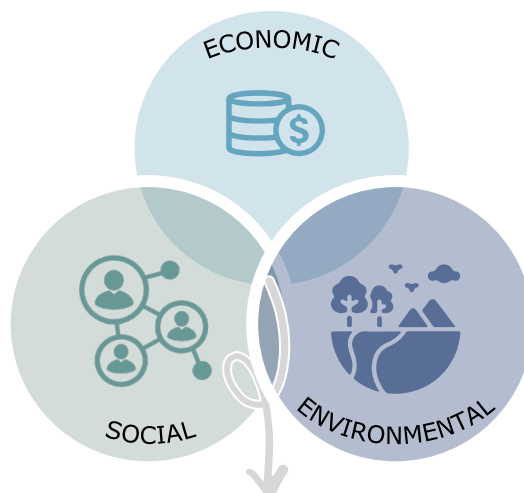
Indicators of effective water management

Participants were making judgements in relation to the effectiveness of water management based on their on-the-ground experiences. These related to social, environmental and economic factors – with effectiveness being a subjective measure influenced by and assessed in the context of individual priorities.

Social –

Positive indicators included:

- ✓ Water available for town and recreational use as well as cultural purposes
- ✓ Thriving communities and populations maintained
- ✓ Aesthetics of local areas
- ✓ Value of water recognised by community
- ✓ Positive relationships with self (i.e. mental health) and others (e.g. limited conflicts/ disunity over resource)



When engaging with community members about water in the Basin, it is important to consider and communicate via all three of these lenses (economic, environmental and social) without prioritising one over the others.

Economic –

Positive indicators included:

- ✓ Economic survival of towns
- ✓ Food production/ 'food bowl'
- ✓ Jobs in community, tourism, exports and financial stability
- ✓ Property/ land prices
- ✓ Effective regulation of larger/ foreign investment companies
- ✓ Affordable water
- ✓ Security of annual water allocations

Environmental –

Positive indicators included:

- ✓ Biodiversity and conservation (of plants and animals)
- ✓ Water quality (e.g. lack of blue/ green algae, appropriate salinity, blackwater etc.)
- ✓ Catchment health (free from erosion, pests etc.)
- ✓ Water quantity (sufficient for environmental assets)
- ✓ Healthy system that's resilient to shocks/ weather events
- ✓ Water being used sustainably (i.e. not wasted)











Desired characteristics



The majority of water licence holders said they want to know more about water rules, regulations and enforcement in the Basin, but less than half of this group said it's easy to understand the water rules and regulations. This presents a large opportunity for education about water enforcement and regulations. Water licence holders also said that they feel there isn't enough information available about how water is managed in the Basin.

Desired characteristics of water management

Participants in the qualitative research raised a range of desired characteristics for decision-making and management processes, each of which was seen as important for supporting positive perceptions and outcomes for those living in the Basin. However, currently it was felt that many of these were not meeting expectations.

 <p>Cooperation and collaboration between governments and agencies, with Federal oversight – to support consistency of management across the Basin (the quantitative research found cooperation between governments and other organisations to be the strongest predictor of positive sentiment among water licence holder respondents).</p>	 <p>Evidence-based decisions – i.e. water management decisions driven by science, data, technology, monitoring and informed by local context, in order to increase trust and 'buy-in' (this was found to be a significant predictor of positive sentiment among community member respondents in the quantitative research).</p>
 <p>Transparency and accountability – it was important for water management processes and decisions to be transparent (i.e. communicated to the public), and for authorities to be accountable for their decisions (i.e. having clarity around who was responsible for what, and these agencies "owning" their decisions).</p>	 <p>Independent management – by being apolitical and acting with integrity. The quantitative research found that:</p> <p>72% of community members 81% of water licence holders</p> <p>...felt that Government decision makers who are responsible for water rules should not be allowed to buy or sell water commercially.</p>
 <p>Consistent in rules and regulations – consistency in the rules and their application across States/ Territory and between different water licence holders was important to increase perceived fairness of water management.</p>	 <p>Fair and equitable water use and distribution – so that all water users across the basin received a 'fair share' of the available water.</p>
 <p>Strong compliance and enforcement of water rules and regulations – to ensure that all water users were following the same rules.</p>	 <p>Open and proactive engagement and communications – including to raise awareness of, and educate about, the system, the Basin Plan, current water management activities and positive stories/ outcomes in the Basin.</p>
 <p>Forward planning for weather events (e.g. droughts, floods) – to ensure that adequate water supply and quality was available at these times.</p>	 <p>Innovation and adaptation – to continue to increase water efficiency and security for the future.</p>

Q27. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Murray-Darling Basin, in general. "Government decision makers who are responsible for water rules and regulations should not be allowed to buy or sell water commercially". Total agree result shown. Base: Community (n=817), WLH (n=200).



Perceptions of water management

Across all audiences, the Basin was considered important for communities' survival – and **knowing that water in the Basin was managed was reassuring for many**. However, while some positive perceptions were identified, the negative perceptions surrounding water management (including the influence of political motives, local knowledge not being considered and lack of cooperation in management decisions) were found to outweigh the positive – resulting in an intensity of negative sentiment.

Emotions and attitudes relating to water management

Negative attitudes to water management in the Basin (e.g. despair, fear, hopelessness, scepticism) **also tended to be more commonly reported than positive attitudes** (e.g. interest, support, understanding) across all audiences.