

CASE STUDY 5

A STRONG WATCHDOG FOR WATER REFORMS

“Despite the frequent discord about many water management issues, there is one thing that all parties agree on – non-compliant or illegal extraction of water should not be tolerated and should be dealt with firmly.”

Ken Matthews AO,
Independent investigation into NSW water management and compliance

Failure of the current system

The passing of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan in 2012 was a historic moment in Australian water policy. It was meant to herald an end of the water wars and chart a path for the sustainable return of water to the environment. However, the historic Basin Plan is only as effective as the watchdogs who implement it. In 2017 explosive allegations of water theft emerged in parts of the Murray-Darling Basin, where water intended for the environment was allegedly taken without authorisation to irrigate the crops of large agri-businesses.

How the new system will help communities and nature

The intention of our national environmental law is not being realised. Relaxed land clearing controls at the state level are causing serious impacts on threatened species and ecological communities and the Federal Government is not enforcing the law.

The use of environment water in the Murray-Darling Basin for irrigation was the result of a failure of regulators at both the state and federal levels. Under a new generation of national environmental laws an independent Environmental Protection Agency would be tasked with ensuring compliance with national environmental plans, including the Basin Plan. The agency would have sufficient authority and autonomy to undertake monitoring and investigative actions to ensure compliance with the Basin Plan.

