SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND LANDSCAPES

SUBMISSION TO THE

2026 Murray–Darling Basin Plan Review

Landscapes, Community and Water: A Northern Basin Perspective

May 2026

Organisation	Southern Queensland Landscapes (Southern Qld Landscapes)
Organisation Type	Natural Resource Management (NRM) Body; Community and not-for-profit
Region	Southern Queensland – Condamine, Balonne, Border Rivers, Maranoa, Paroo and Bulloo catchments (314,398 km²)
Primary Sector	Dryland agriculture and grazing; irrigated agriculture; carbon and biodiversity markets; ecological tourism
Publication	Public – this submission will be published on the Southern Qld Landscapes website

Executive Summary

Southern Queensland Landscapes (Southern Qld Landscapes) is the Natural Resource Management organisation for southern Queensland, working across the northern Murray–Darling Basin in the Condamine–Balonne, Maranoa, Border Rivers, Paroo and Bulloo catchments. Our region spans 314,398 km² of the Basin's headwaters and mid-catchments, supporting approximately 245,000 people across communities from Toowoomba to Hungerford, and from the Granite Belt to the mulga rangelands of the far south-west.

We welcome the 2026 Basin Plan Review and the MDBA's commitment to transparent, inclusive and evidence-based decision-making. This submission draws on long-term monitoring data, regional restoration projects, landholder engagement, First Nations partnerships, and catchment-scale assessments – all underpinned by our Regional NRM Plan, Flourishing Landscapes and Healthy Communities (FLHC), developed with and for the people of southern Queensland.

This submission makes one overarching argument: the Basin Plan cannot achieve its environmental objectives for the Northern Basin without sustained, commensurate investment in catchment-scale land management. Environmental water is a powerful tool – but it arrives in a degraded catchment and delivers only a fraction of its potential benefit when floodplains are disconnected, riparian zones are bare, soils no longer infiltrate, and sediment loads are high.

We present four priority opportunities for the 2026 Review:

- Formally recognise regional NRM organisations as co-delivery partners for Basin Plan environmental outcomes, with dedicated program funding and alignment of Water Resource Plans with NRM Regional Plans.
- Invest in integrated catchment-scale restoration programs – floodplain and foothill rehydration, riparian fencing and revegetation, fish passage and waterway protection – that multiply the value of environmental water.
- Establish a stewardship and co-investment mechanism for private landholders who deliver biodiversity, water quality, carbon sequestration and cultural values as public goods.
- Strengthen First Nations leadership and economic participation in Basin water management, including funded ranger programs as water quality custodians and cultural water planning co-designers.

> *This submission is supported by evidence from five Southern Qld Landscapes delivery programs, each of which demonstrates, at real scale, the co-benefits that catchment investment generates for Basin Plan outcomes. These are presented as case studies in Section 3.*

We stand ready to work with the MDBA, the Australian Government and our southern NRM counterparts to design and deliver that integration at scale.

1. About Southern Queensland Landscapes

1.1 Our Organisation and Role

Southern Qld Landscapes is the NRM body for the southern Queensland region. We operate across three management units – the Condamine, the Maranoa-Balonne and Border Rivers, and the South West – covering a region approximately 30% larger than the state of Victoria. Our region sits in the northernmost portion of the Basin and generates the runoff and sediment that flows downstream through New South Wales and ultimately to South Australia. What happens on the land in southern Queensland directly determines the quality and timing of flows entering the broader Basin system. We are the headwaters.

Our work is guided by the Flourishing Landscapes and Healthy Communities (FLHC) Plan (2022), developed through extensive engagement with irrigators, landholders, industry, local government, 28 First Nations groups and community organisations across southern Queensland. This Plan establishes the community's vision for the region and provides the strategic anchor for this submission.

1.2 Our Strategic Framework

> *"Flourishing landscapes with diverse native species, healthy wetlands and other waterways, and vigorous soils supporting viable, healthy, and connected communities and industries that value and protect natural and cultural systems." – Southern Qld Landscapes FLHC Plan Vision*

The FLHC Plan explicitly identifies the Murray–Darling Basin and its water planning framework as central to achieving this vision. It documents the community's priorities across five themes: vigorous soils, diverse native species, healthy waterways and wetlands, healthy economy, and healthy communities.

1.3 Our Delivery Track Record

Southern Qld Landscapes has an established history of delivering on-ground works that directly advance Basin Plan environmental objectives. Our programs have included:

- Waterway fencing and off-stream stock watering infrastructure across the Condamine–Balonne and Border Rivers catchments, protecting riparian vegetation and improving in-stream water quality.
- Floodplain rehydration works – 'slow the flow' infrastructure that dissipates overland flow energy, restores natural function to floodplains, recharges soil moisture and reduces erosion-driven sediment loads entering the river system.
- Off-take fish screens on diversion infrastructure to protect native fish during irrigation extraction events, directly supporting Basin Plan fish passage objectives.
- Restoration of riparian vegetation across priority waterways, pest and weed management, and coordinated catchment planning with landholders.
- First Nations service provision co-designed and co-delivered with Traditional Owners across the region.

2. The Northern Basin Context: Why Southern Queensland Matters

2.1 A Distinct and Undervalued System

The Discussion Paper acknowledges important differences between the northern and southern Basins. We welcome this recognition but urge the Review to go further in understanding and addressing the specific circumstances of the northern Basin's upstream Queensland catchments.

Southern Queensland rivers are characterised by high variability, low regulation, episodic flows and extensive dryland and ephemeral systems. Grazing covers over 82% of land use in our region. The primary lever for improving environmental outcomes in our catchments is not water allocation – it is land management. The health of floodplains, riparian zones, soil cover and water quality is determined by what happens on the land, not in the stream.

The Basin Plan Review is of keen interest to irrigation stakeholders in southern Queensland.

While the irrigation equipped area of southern Queensland is only 1% of land area it provides approximately 30% of almost $5 billion gross value of production (2022-2023). In 2022-2023 the Toowoomba and Western Downs local government areas were the highest agricultural producing LGA's in Queensland together generating 10% of Queensland's production. With both these LGA's also in the northern basin these figures highlight the importance of basin water management to the state of Queensland and the irrigation component to the communities of southern Queensland.

Our community's own data documents the consequences of a drying climate: river flows from the region have been approximately half in the past 20 years of what they were in the preceding century. This is not only the result of extraction – it reflects reduced soil infiltration, degraded floodplains that no longer retain water, and a landscape that detrimentally runs water off rather than filtering it through the soil into the system.

2.2 The Land-Water Nexus the Plan Must Address

> *The community of southern Queensland has articulated this clearly: a Basin Plan that manages water without managing the land that generates it will fail. Poor water quality begins in the paddock. High energy overland flow results in high sediment loads from more significant bank and bed erosion. Sediment loads, nutrient runoff and degraded riparian zones are land management problems. Environmental water arriving in a degraded catchment delivers a fraction of its potential benefit. The Plan can and should explicitly require alignment between Water Resource Plans and NRM Regional Plans.*

The Discussion Paper itself notes that "land management actions such as pest control, fencing and revegetation, habitat restoration, fish passage and grazing management need more integration with environmental watering." We agree entirely. The question is: how will this integration be funded, coordinated and governed? The Review must answer this question with specificity.

2.3 The Economic Opportunity Framing

Southern Queensland communities are not simply asking for relief from Basin Plan impacts – we are asserting that our landscapes represent a major economic opportunity for the nation, if investment is structured appropriately. Our region offers four distinct economic growth opportunities tied directly to healthy landscape and water outcomes:

- Dryland and irrigated agriculture: the Darling Downs and Condamine floodplains are among Australia's most productive agricultural zones. Investment in soil health, floodplain rehydration and water quality directly underpins long-term agricultural productivity.
- Carbon and biodiversity markets: southern Queensland rangelands hold enormous carbon sequestration potential. A well-designed stewardship model – keeping productive and sustainable landholders on the land while rewarding ecological outcomes – is the better path.
- Ecological and First Nations tourism: Carnarvon Gorge, Currawinya, the Condamine headwaters, and the mulga rangelands offer world-class nature-based tourism experiences that are currently underdeveloped. Healthy waterways and landscapes are the product that underpins this industry.
- Public-private partnership arrangements for public benefits of land management change: land managers in our region provide water filtration, sediment capture, carbon storage and habitat services to the nation at no charge. Partnership arrangements that recogonise and resource these services would transform the economics of landscape stewardship.

The economic impact of the case studies in the following section has been estimated using idProfile's Economic Impact Model. This model estimates the indirect output and the value added by the $74 million cash and inkind collectively invested in these projects over 3 years. The model shows indirect output of $57 million along with $50 million value added to the regional economy and support for 28 direct and 64 indirect local jobs each year. These figures make it clear that partnership investment between government and private land managers generates significant public value in supporting the regional economy.

3. Case Studies: Southern Queensland Landscapes Programs in Action

The five case studies below represent active Southern Qld Landscapes delivery programs that generate direct, measurable outcomes aligned with the Basin Plan's environmental, cultural and social objectives. Taken together, they constitute a compelling evidence base for the investment framework we propose in Section 4.

3.1 Fish-Friendly Water Extraction Project (Northern Basin Toolkit)

Fish-Friendly Water Extraction (FFWE) Project

Demonstrating fish screen technology on irrigation off-takes in the Queensland Murray–Darling Basin

Key Project Facts

- Funding: $6.8 million (Commonwealth, Northern Basin Toolkit)
- Delivered by: Southern Queensland Landscapes on behalf of Qld DLGWV
- Catchments: Border Rivers, Condamine and Lower Balonne
- Screens installed: 12 completed (of 16 agreements; 4 not progressed due to cost/feasibility)
- Monitoring: Biophysical, erosion, social, engagement (2023–2026)
- Final report: April 2026
- Co-contribution estimate (based on Ernst and Young 2022): $28.6 million of cash and inkind

Outcomes Relevant to the Basin Plan

- Monitoring confirmed: screened sites recorded zero fish in pumped water vs average 19.64 fish/pump event at unscreened sites
- Over 1,700 fish sampled across all sites in Feb 2026; alien species only 0.5% of total
- 12 diverse screen types and configurations tested across real-world off-take situations
- Key barriers identified: cost, reliability, feasibility – all addressable with appropriate investment frameworks
- Industry social monitoring showed receptiveness to voluntary adoption if regulatory and cost barriers addressed
- Drone LiDAR and 3D survey technology proven as cost-effective site assessment tool for irrigation infrastructure
- Strong First Nations engagement: Bigambul, Githabul, Kamilaroi and other nations participated throughout

What This Project Demonstrates for the Review

This project proves that fish-friendly technology works in northern Basin conditions – but voluntary uptake will remain low without a supportive policy and investment framework. The Review should establish clear expectations for fish screen adoption, a co-investment model for smaller water users, and a successor program to continue technology development. The project also demonstrates the value of NRM delivery: Southern Qld Landscapes mobilised water users, First Nations groups, specialist contractors and researchers in a way that government programs alone cannot replicate.

3.2 Northern Basin Fencing Program

Northern Basin Riparian Fencing Program

Protecting priority waterways across the northern Basin through landholder-delivered fencing and off-stream water

Key Project Facts

- Funding: $500,000
- Delivered under: Northern Basin Priority Projects / Basin Toolkit
- Region: Condamine, Border Rivers and broader southern Queensland waterway systems
- Scale: Multiple landholder agreements; approx. 950 kilometres of fencing completed across agreements with 90+ property managers
- Works: Riparian fencing + off-stream stock watering point installations
- Completion report: September 2023
- Co-contribution estimate (based on Ernst and Young 2022): $2.1 million of cash and inkind

Outcomes Relevant to the Basin Plan

- Direct exclusion of livestock from waterways: protects bank stability, riparian vegetation and water quality
- Off-stream watering removes pressure on in-stream water sources, reducing trampling and faecal contamination
- Works delivered on properties spanning a range of land types – irrigated cropping to dryland grazing – demonstrating program adaptability
- Landholders with established fencing have a platform for ongoing grazing management improvement
- Combined fencing + watering point model is the most cost-effective large-scale water quality intervention available in unregulated systems
- Strong alignment with Basin Plan water quality and river connectivity objectives

What This Project Demonstrates for the Review

Riparian fencing and off-stream water infrastructure is the highest-return Basin Plan complementary measure available in the Queensland northern Basin. This program delivered at scale, but is now unfunded. The Review should establish a permanent, rolling program for waterway protection works in unregulated systems, co-delivered through regional NRM organisations, with minimum 5-year funding certainty and simplified reporting requirements. The evidence base is unambiguous: every dollar invested in waterway protection in the headwaters generates compounding benefits throughout the Basin.

3.3 Aboriginal Waterways Assessments (AWAs) – Upper Condamine and Warrego

Aboriginal Waterways Assessments: Upper Condamine and Warrego Catchments

Integrating Traditional Owner knowledge into waterway management prioritisation and water planning

Key Project Facts

- Pilot: $60,000
- Delivered by: Condamine Alliance and South-West NRM (predecessor organisations to Southern Qld Landscapes)
- Lead agency: Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage Protection
- Timing: 2017 (pilot programs, forming foundation for ongoing AWA methodology)
- Nations involved: Mandandanji (Balonne), Bidjara and Kunja (Warrego)
- Assessment scope: Cultural health, water quality and environmental condition across priority waterway sites
- Method: MDBA–MLDRIN Aboriginal Waterways Assessment framework, tailored to Queensland conditions

Outcomes Relevant to the Basin Plan

- Generated baseline cultural health and environmental condition data for priority waterways in the Condamine and Warrego systems
- Traditional Owners received full intellectual property ownership of AWA outputs – a model for genuine data sovereignty
- Assessment data directly informs Water Resource Plan priorities and Healthy Waters Management Plans
- Demonstrates that First Nations land managers hold critical knowledge about waterway condition that complements scientific monitoring
- Builds genuine capacity and employment pathways for Traditional Owners in water management
- Provides a replicable, scalable methodology that could be embedded across the northern Basin

What This Project Demonstrates for the Review

Aboriginal Waterways Assessments are a proven, scalable tool for integrating First Nations knowledge into Basin water management. The Review should mandate AWAs as a standing component of Water Resource Plan development, review and monitoring – not a one-off exercise funded from project grants. First Nations organisations should be resourced to own, maintain and update AWA data as custodians of their country. The cultural health of waterways is inseparable from their ecological health; the Basin Plan needs both lenses.

3.4 NRMEP Waterway Protection through Grazing Management (2025–2028)

Protecting Southern Queensland Waterways Through Grazing Management (NRMEP)

Scaled waterway fencing and practice change program protecting 4,500 ha of riparian vegetation across southern Queensland

Key Project Facts

- Funding: $6.6 million over 3 years (Natural Resource Management Expansion Program, Queensland Government)
- Delivered by: Southern Queensland Landscapes
- Duration: July 2025 to June 2028
- Targets: 4,500 ha improved riparian vegetation condition; 120,000 ha improved land condition from grazing practice change
- Mechanism: Two-cohort landholder partnership model with co-investment in fencing and off-stream watering
- Co-contribution estimate (based on Ernst and Young 2022): $27.7 million of cash and inkind

Outcomes Relevant to the Basin Plan

- Directly targets water quality improvement at catchment scale across priority Basin waterways in southern Queensland
- Combines infrastructure installation (fencing, off-stream water) with practice change to achieve durable, landscape-scale outcomes
- Two-cohort delivery model with VegCAT and LCAT monitoring enables evidence-based adaptive management and robust reporting
- Co-investment model leverages landholder contributions beyond direct program funding
- Provides employment and capacity in rural communities aligned with Basin Plan delivery
- Builds a replicable, evidence-rich template for the scaled catchment stewardship investment the Basin Plan requires

What This Project Demonstrates for the Review

This program is currently being delivered and is on track to generate significant measurable outcomes for Basin water quality and riparian condition. It demonstrates that regional NRM organisations can design, manage and report on complex, multi-landholder, multi-outcome programs at scale – and do so in ways that build genuine community capacity rather than simply contracting on-ground works. The Review should recognise programs like this as the model for Basin Plan complementary measures delivery, and commit to sustained, multi-year funding that allows program design to be ambitious rather than short-term.

3.5 Restoring the Natural Functions of Floodplains (2023)

Creating flourishing landscapes to support healthy communities, Warrego Priority Area Onground works

Restoring the natural function of floodplains and wetlands through landholder-led rehydration and grazing management for ecosystem resilience and long-term water security.

Key Project Facts

- Funding: Queensland Governments Natural Resource Recovery Program
- Delivered by: Southern Qld Landscapes
- Catchments: Warrego and Paroo
- Scale: 143,000 ha of semi-arid floodplains and mulga country on 16 properties
- Strategic earth, rock and timber banks installed to slow and spread water
- Rehydration design using topographic mapping and laser level planning
- Major shift from set stocking to rotational grazing
- Fencing to control total grazing pressure and allow rest–recovery cycles
- Project funding $330,000;
- Co-contribution estimate Co-contribution estimate (based on Ernst and Young 2022): $1.4 million of cash and inkind

Outcomes Relevant to the Basin Plan

- Hydrological Function Restored: Water now spreads across floodplains rather than draining rapidly through bore drains, or running off hard set bare ground, the energy of overland flow is reduced resulting in lower erosive force at bank and bed.
- Increased ground cover: reduces erosion, improves soil carbon, and enhances drought resilience.
- Wetlands reconnected: Wetlands on the properties are reconnected to the Lower Paroo Catchment, supporting Basin Plan objectives for water dependent ecosystems
- Sustainable Grazing and Productivity: Productivity has increased to the point where the business is economically secure and expanding
- Community & Knowledge Sharing: Restoration techniques are now being adopted by neighbouring landholders

What This Project Demonstrates for the Review

This project shows that large scale hydrological repair is possible in semi arid systems using simple, low cost, nature based interventions. The shift from set stocking to rotational grazing was essential to recovery. This reinforces that grazing pressure management is a Basin scale driver of ecological condition. Satellite imagery, on ground observation, and vegetation response provide clear, measurable evidence of improvement — exactly the type of data the Basin Plan Review seeks.

4. Responses to the Discussion Paper

4.1 Complementary Measures and the Role of regional NRM organisations (Chapter 4)

The Discussion Paper's discussion of environmental water management rightly identifies the need to invest in complementary land management measures. We strongly support this direction.

Our position

Southern Qld Landscapes and our community have identified the following priority complementary measures for the southern Queensland portion of the northern Basin:

- Catchment-scale erosion control planning and infrastructure coordinated across tenures to slow the movement of water and sediment.
- Restoration of floodplains through coordinated cross-tenure action including fencing, revegetation and rehydration works to reconnect floodplains to their water supply.
- Waterway fencing and off-stream stock watering to protect riparian zones and improve in-stream water quality and habitat – the receiving environment for water from floodplains and toe-slopes.
- Fish-friendly water extraction infrastructure (modernised screens on diversion offtakes) to protect native fish populations during irrigation.
- First Nations business contracted in project activities co-designed with Traditional Owners, including cool/ecological burning, waterway monitoring and invasive species management.

Our ask

- Formally integrate NRM Regional Plans into Water Resource Plans.
- A dedicated complementary measures investment stream, co-ordinated through NRM bodies, with minimum 5-year funding certainty.
- Establish regional NRM organisations as recognised delivery partners for Basin Plan environmental outcomes with defined roles, capacity and accountability mechanisms.

4.2 River Connectivity in the Northern Basin (Chapter 5)

In southern Queensland's unregulated and partly-regulated systems, the primary barrier to sustained river connectivity is not weirs or extraction structures – there are very few of these. The primary barrier is reduced catchment retention with two key causes. Degraded soils and floodplains no longer retain and slowly release water and fast moving surface water continues to pick up and deposit silt into natural waterholes in the system reducing volume and depth. Addressing these issues requires investment in landscape rehydration.

Our ask

- Recognise floodplain rehydration and soil water restoration as legitimate northern Basin connectivity interventions.
- Fund a southern Queensland catchment connectivity program through NRM delivery, targeting priority rehydration areas identified in the FLHC Plan.
- Establish a Queensland NRM representative seat on any northern Basin connectivity advisory body.

4.3 Floodplain and Wetland Health (Chapter 6)

Currawinya's wetlands are of international significance, managed jointly by the Budjiti Nation and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. These wetlands are directly connected to the downstream Ramsar listed Paroo River Wetlands. Works in the region also influence the health of the Narran Lakes Ramsar system which is directly dependent on the quality and timing of flows from southern Queensland's Balonne River system. Investment in catchment management in our region is therefore investment in downstream Ramsar outcomes.

Our ask

- Explicitly recognise the upstream-downstream relationship between southern Queensland catchment management and Ramsar wetland outcomes in the Narran Lakes and Paroo River systems.
- Fund ongoing Southern Qld Landscapes involvement in cross-border catchment stewardship for these priority wetlands.
- Require Water Resource Plans to reference and integrate with NRM Regional Plans for floodplain management objectives.

4.4 Water Quality (Chapter 8)

Water quality problems in the Murray–Darling Basin begin in the catchment, not in the channel. Sediment, nutrients and blue-green algae blooms are fundamentally land management problems that require land management solutions.

Our ask

- Require water quality management frameworks to integrate land management measures coordinated through regional NRM organisations as a core delivery mechanism.
- Recognise existing water quality monitoring infrastructure and data, including the Condamine Balonne Water Committee (CBWC) long-term monitoring data, in the Basin-wide monitoring framework.
- Expand on the successes of previous good management as examples of what can be achieved in the next 10 years of the Basin Plan.
- Establish First Nations rangers as water quality custodians with funded monitoring roles.
- Invest in erosion control, ground cover improvement and riparian fencing programs in priority water quality catchments, co-delivered through Southern Qld Landscapes.

4.5 Water Resource Plans and Basin Plan Regulatory Design (Chapters 10–11)

Our ask

- An explicit requirement for WRPs to reference and align with NRM Regional Plans in their coverage of land management, water quality, and environmental flow objectives.
- Southern Qld Landscapes and equivalent regional NRM organisations to be formally recognised in Water Resource Plan governance structures.
- Reporting requirements to be co-designed with regional NRM organisations and land managers, written in plain English accessible to the public and taxpayers.
- The current Water Act Review to consider formal statutory roles for regional NRM organisations in Basin Plan delivery.

5. Gaps in the 2026 Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper

> *There are a range of important areas that are not well covered in the discussion paper. This section outlines these areas and highlights the relevance of their inclusion.*

5.1 The Role of regional NRM organisations as Delivery Partners

The Discussion Paper does not adequately address the institutional question of who delivers complementary land management measures, at what scale, and with what funding. regional NRM organisations are the only institutions with the geographic reach, community trust, landholder relationships and on-ground delivery capability to implement the catchment-scale programs the Basin Plan requires – yet they are not mentioned as delivery partners in any structural sense.

This is a critical gap. Without regional NRM organisations formally embedded in the Basin Plan delivery architecture – with associated funding streams, reporting roles and governance seats – the Discussion Paper's ambitions for complementary measures will remain aspirational. We call on the Review to explicitly address this institutional gap.

5.2 The Economics of Unregulated Catchment Communities

The Discussion Paper's socioeconomic analysis framework is primarily oriented toward irrigated agricultural communities and the impacts of water allocation decisions. The very different economic circumstances of dryland grazing communities in the northern Basin's headwaters are not meaningfully addressed.

These communities are experiencing compound pressures: climate variability, commodity price uncertainty, aged demographics, reduced government service access, and the emerging threat of absentee carbon farming aggregation displacing farming families. A Basin Plan that does not engage with these structural economic challenges will fail to secure the community participation it needs for sustainable catchment stewardship.

5.3 Carbon Farming and its Consequences for Basin Management

The rapid growth of large-scale carbon farming aggregations, that require an exit or decrease in agricultural activity, in the northern Basin is profoundly reshaping land tenure, land use and community demography in ways that directly affect Basin Plan outcomes – yet the Discussion Paper does not address this trend at all.

When working farm families are displaced by absentee-owned carbon properties, the result is: loss of local pest and weed management capability; reduced fire management competence; degraded fencing and water infrastructure maintenance; and community service collapse. These outcomes are bad for the Basin and bad for rural communities. A well-designed public-private partnership mechanism – which keeps families on the land and rewards ecological outcomes – is both better social policy and better Basin management. It would be of value for the review to grapple with this.

5.4 Recognition of Climate Change Risks and Opportunities

New mandatory climate reporting provides a clear leadership opportunity for MDBA. Large agricultural entities and other large scale water users will be required to define and disclose how they will govern their identified physical and transition risks and opportunities in relation to climate change. As a show of understanding and a way to build trust, MDBA is well positioned to prepare this reporting on a voluntary basis. Such reporting would highlight how MDBA sees climate change impacts on Basin Plan objectives with reference to 1.5 degree and 2.5 degree warming scenarios over short, medium and long timeframes relevant to the plan. As a nationally significant nature asset which will emerge as a disclosed dependency for significant economic activity it makes sense to have a collective view of how Basin management objectives will transition to new climate realities.

5.4 Recognition of Cultural Water and First Nations Rights

In the experience of the Southern QLD Landscapes' team there is high value in First Nations knowledge applied to strategic decision making. At the same time there is increasing capacity among First Nations businesses to offer practical services in the supply chain of land management practices. Examples include invasive species management, cool/ecological burning and ecological and cultural values monitoring. The Discussion Paper suggests that separate objectives may be needed for cultural water however Southern QLD Landscapes would urge a more inclusive approach that positions First Nations people as a critical and integrated part of local communities.

The Discussion Paper acknowledges the importance of First Nations inclusion but does not adequately address the substantive, rights-based question of cultural water allocation and First Nations economic participation in water management. Cultural flow provisions in the Queensland Water Resource Plans remain aspirational without resourcing. The gap between policy intent and practical implementation is not addressed.

Furthermore, the Discussion Paper does not sufficiently recognise the value of Aboriginal Waterways Assessments and similar place-based, Indigenous-led monitoring frameworks as core tools in the Basin's evidence base. These could be embedded in the monitoring and evaluation framework, not treated as supplementary consultation.

5.5 The Upstream-Downstream Nexus for Ramsar Wetlands

The Discussion Paper discusses floodplain and wetland health primarily in terms of environmental water delivery and SDL outcomes. It does not adequately address the causal relationship between upstream catchment condition and downstream wetland health – particularly for Queensland's contribution to the Narran Lakes and Currawinya Ramsar sites.

Australian international obligations for these Ramsar sites cannot be met without investment in southern Queensland catchment management. This upstream-downstream nexus should be explicitly recognised in the revised Plan, with corresponding investment obligations for Queensland-based NRM delivery.

5.6 Technology Adoption and the Need for Co-Investment Models

The Discussion Paper does not address the significant opportunity – and the real barriers – to technology adoption in northern Basin water management. Our FFWE Project case study demonstrates that fish screen technology works, but voluntary adoption will remain low without a co-investment model that addresses the real cost and feasibility barriers water users face.

More broadly, enabling technologies have the potential to significantly improve both environmental outcomes and the evidence base for Basin Plan management. These include:

- remote sensing and interpretation
- precision water management
- drone-based site assessment and data interpretation
- telemetry-enabled water monitoring
- increase density of radar network to more accurately track isolated dispersed rainfall events

A technology adoption framework, co-developed with regional NRM organisations and industry, would be a useful addition to the revised Plan.

In addition, the less populated areas of southern QLD have much less telemetry deployed. This poses significant risks to managing the increasingly erratic storm behaviour. With more rain gauging stations embedded in community, predictions of timing, volumes and flows would provide much improved risk management.

5.7 Long-term Funding Certainty for Catchment Investment

A recurring and fundamental gap in the Basin Plan's implementation architecture is the absence of long-term, predictable funding for catchment-scale land management. Programs have been delivered in short funding cycles – typically 2–3 years – that make it impossible to design, monitor and adapt programs at the landscape scale the Basin Plan requires.

The Review should establish a commitment to minimum 5-year funding cycles for NRM-delivered complementary measures, with transparent investment criteria, streamlined reporting, and a clear accountability framework tied to Basin Plan environmental outcomes. This is not a 'nice to have' – it is a structural prerequisite for effective delivery.

6. Priority Investment Opportunities for Southern Queensland

Southern Qld Landscapes identifies the following specific investment opportunities that the 2026 Basin Plan Review should unlock. Each is grounded in our FLHC Plan, our community's priorities, and our established delivery capability.

Investment Opportunity	Why It Matters for Basin Outcomes	Southern Qld Landscapes Delivery Role
Permanent waterway fencing and off-stream water program (northern Basin unregulated rivers)	Highest-return complementary measure; directly improves water quality, riparian vegetation and habitat connectivity. Proven at scale through NBFP and NRMEP programs.	*Co-delivery partner; landholder engagement; monitoring and reporting; adaptive management*
Catchment-scale floodplain and toe-slope rehydration	Restores soil water retention on floodplains. e; reduces sediment and nutrient loads; extends baseflow duration. Addresses the northern Basin's connectivity challenge.	*Regional program design and delivery; partner coordination; FLHC Plan spatial priority framework*
Scaled-up fish-friendly water extraction program (successor to FFWE)	Protects native fish during irrigation extraction events; demonstrates technology at scale; builds case for co-investment and regulatory framework.	*Existing partnerships, contractor networks, monitoring infrastructure and community trust from FFWE project*
Aboriginal Waterways Assessments embedded in WRP governance	Integrates First Nations knowledge into waterway management; builds cultural health evidence base; empowers communities as custodians.	*Established AWA methodology; relationships with 28 First Nations; intellectual property protocols*
First Nations service provision.	Integrates millennia of landscape knowledge into Basin management; creates economic opportunities; supports cultural flow objectives.	*Co-design and co-delivery with Traditional Owner organisations across all three management units*
Regional carbon and biodiversity market aggregation	Enables landholders to access environmental markets without displacement; builds community-controlled stewardship; preserves rural communities as Basin stewards.	*NRM Atlas spatial data; landholder networks; market linkage capability*
Public-private partnership mechanism for dryland graziers	Rewards public goods production (water quality, soil carbon, biodiversity, cultural values); makes landscape stewardship economically viable for farming families.	*Program design and landholder partnership; monitoring using LCAT and VegCAT; reporting to Basin accountability frameworks*

7. First Nations and Southern Queensland Water Country

The 28 First Nations of southern Queensland have a deep and ongoing connection to the waterways, landscapes and ecological systems of our region. For the Kooma, Mungindi, Budjiti, Bigambul, Githabul, Kambuwal, Kamilaroi and the many other First Peoples of our region, rivers and wetlands are living entities, not water infrastructure.

Southern Qld Landscapes acknowledges that the Basin Plan has historically failed to adequately reflect First Nations rights, interests and knowledge in water management. We support the Discussion Paper's proposals to strengthen First Nations inclusion in water planning and decision-making, and we note that our FLHC Plan embeds First Nations knowledge and partnership throughout.

We make three specific observations for the Review:

- Cultural flows must be treated as real and measurable outcomes for the Queensland portion of the Basin, not aspirational language. The three accredited Queensland Water Resource Plans (Condamine–Balonne, Border Rivers–Moonie, Warrego–Paroo–Nebine) include cultural flow outcomes that require resourcing to implement.
- First Nations rangers and land managers should be recognised as water quality custodians and Caring for Country delivery agents within the Basin Plan framework, not as recipients of consultation. Funding should flow directly to First Nations organisations as on ground delivery agents and be co-designed within existing community structures.
- regional NRM organisations work in this space – Southern Qld Landscapes has existing relationships, a Reconciliation Action Plan and co-delivery models with First Nations across our region. These strong working relationships should be supported and built upon, not bypassed by new structures.

8. Responses to Discussion Paper Feedback Questions

What do you think of the issues and options presented?

We broadly support the direction of the 2026 Review and the Discussion Paper's identification of complementary measures, river connectivity, floodplain health, water quality and regulatory reform as priority issues. These are the right areas of focus.

However, we are concerned that the options presented remain too focused on water management within the channel and do not adequately address the upstream catchment management that determines the quality and quantity of flows entering the channel in the first place. In the northern Basin particularly, the greatest leverage for environmental improvement lies in landscape stewardship, rather than in-stream engineering.

Are there other issues and options that should be considered?

- The role of regional NRM organisations as funded delivery partners for Basin Plan environmental objectives needs to be explicitly considered as a governance option.
- The alignment of Water Resource Plans with NRM Regional Plans would add value and local relevance to both.
- A public-private partnership mechanism for private land managers who deliver Basin-wide public goods would be a value-add as part of the revised Basin Plan framework.
- The economic consequences of absentee carbon farming aggregation in the northern Basin should be assessed and addressed through improved policy design.
- The Basin Plan's socioeconomic impact assessment framework should be extended to capture the distinct circumstances of dryland communities in the northern Basin.

What do you see as the priorities and why?

Our top three priorities for the 2026 Review are:

- Recognition and resourcing of regional NRM organisations as Basin Plan delivery partners. This is the single highest-leverage action available to the Review.
- Investment in complementary land management measures at catchment scale, coordinated through regional NRM organisations, with dedicated funding streams and minimum 5-year program certainty.
- A public-private partnership mechanism for private landholders that recognises the public goods they provide: water quality, soil carbon, biodiversity and cultural values.

9. Conclusion

Southern Queensland Landscapes submits to the 2026 Basin Plan Review as a committed partner in the Basin's long-term health. We are not here to resist the Basin Plan – we are here to make it work better for our landscapes, our communities and our First Peoples.

The communities of southern Queensland have invested decades in landscape stewardship. They have fenced waterways, built contour banks, managed pests, restored floodplains and cared for Country at their own cost and risk. They deserve to be recognised as the Basin Plan's most important delivery partners, not afterthoughts in a water accounting framework designed for the southern system.

> *The case studies in this submission demonstrate that the investment required is not speculative – it is already being delivered by Southern Qld Landscapes programs, generating real, measurable outcomes for Basin objectives. What is needed is the policy framework, the institutional recognition, and the sustained funding certainty to scale this work to the level the Basin Plan demands.*

We urge the MDBA to use the 2026 Review to build the institutional foundations for genuinely integrated land and water management in the northern Basin – with regional NRM organisations, First Nations, landholders and communities at the centre.

Southern Qld Landscapes would welcome the opportunity to present this submission in person to the Review team and to participate in any working groups focused on the northern Basin or complementary measures.

Contact

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This submission is published publicly and can be found on the Southern Qld Landscapes website.

Appendix A: Alignment with the FLHC Plan

The following table maps the key investment asks in this submission to the community goals and priority actions identified in the Southern Qld Landscapes Flourishing Landscapes and Healthy Communities (FLHC) Plan (2022).

Investment Ask	FLHC Plan Theme	Basin Plan Objective
Floodplain rehydration works	*Vigorous Soils; Healthy Waterways*	Floodplain & wetland health; water quality; complementary measures
Waterway fencing & off-stream water	*Healthy Waterways & Wetlands*	Water quality; river connectivity; complementary measures
Fish-friendly water extraction screens	*Healthy Waterways & Wetlands*	Native fish recovery; river connectivity; complementary measures
Aboriginal Waterways Assessments	*First Nations knowledge; Healthy Waterways*	First Nations inclusion; cultural flows; environmental water monitoring
Public-private partnership mechanism	*Healthy Economy; Healthy Communities*	Socioeconomic outcomes; environmental outcomes on private land
First Nations Caring for Country	*All themes – First Peoples foundational*	Cultural flows; First Nations inclusion; environmental water management
Carbon & biodiversity market aggregation	*Healthy Economy; Diverse Native Species*	Socioeconomic outcomes; biodiversity; private land stewardship

Appendix B: Summary of Case Study Programs

The following table provides a quick-reference summary of the five case study programs described in Section 3 of this submission.

Program	Scale/Funding	Key Outcome	Basin Plan Relevance
Fish-Friendly Water Extraction (FFWE)	$6.8M Commonwealth	12 screens installed; zero fish entrainment at screened sites	*Native fish recovery; complementary measures; technology pathway*
Northern Basin Fencing	$500,000	Approx. 950 km of riparian fencing + off-stream water across 90+ agreements with property managers.	*Water quality; river connectivity; riparian restoration*
Aboriginal Waterways Assessments (AWA)	$60,000 (pilot)	Cultural health assessments for Condamine (Githabul) and Warrego (Bidjara, Kunja) waterways	*First Nations inclusion; cultural flows; waterway monitoring*
NRMEP Waterway Protection (Grazing Management)	$6.6M Queensland Government	4,500 ha riparian vegetation; 120,000 ha improved land condition; 2025–2028	*Water quality; complementary measures; NRM delivery model*
Creating flourishing landscapes to support healthy communities, Warrego Priority Area Onground works	$300K	143,000 hectares semi-arid floodplains with rehydration and/or grazing pressure improved; 16 agreements with land managers	*Water quality; complementary measures; NRM delivery model*