



QUEENSLAND
FARMERS'
FEDERATION



Inspector-General of Water Compliance Northern Basin Toolkit Inquiry **November 2024**

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Prepared for
Inspector-General of Water
Compliance

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This submission is provided to:

Inspector-General of Water Compliance

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Our members

- Canegrowers
- Cotton Australia
- Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers
- Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland
- eastAUSmilk
- Australian Cane Farmers Association
- Queensland United Egg Producers
- Turf Queensland
- Pork Queensland
- Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group
- Burdekin River Irrigation Area
- Central Downs Irrigators Ltd
- Fairburn Irrigation Network
- Mallowa Irrigation
- Pioneer Valley Water Co-operative Ltd
- Theodore Water Pty Ltd
- Eton Irrigation
- Lockyer Valley Water Users

About the Queensland Farmers' Federation



The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland.

Our members are agricultural peak bodies who collectively represent more than 13,000 farmers who produce food, fibre and foliage across the state.

QFF's peak body members come together to develop policy and lead projects on the key issues that are important to their farmer members and the Queensland agriculture sector.

Together, we form a strong, unified voice leveraging our effectiveness by working together to drive policy and initiatives that support a strong future for Queensland agriculture.

Executive summary

QFF made a formal submission on the 4th of October 2023, regarding the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Bill 2023. In addition to our previous submission, QFF draws attention to the efficiency and prudence of delivery of the northern Basin Toolkit and key concerns for agricultural stakeholders in the Northern Basin.

It is important to note the issues that have been previously highlighted by QFF and the impact that delivering water back to the Murray-Darling Basin has had on agricultural sector and communities in Queensland.

The noted mismanagement of Basin resources and an inadequate water market, as noted in the 'ACCC, on Murray-Darling Basin water markets inquiry, Interim report,' has been a large contributor to the destabilising of the Murray-Darling Basin. This demonstrates that the Australian Government is still years away from implementing the various actions under the Plan established in 2012.

Submission

QFF welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on Northern Basin Toolkit Inquiry.

We provide this submission without prejudice to any additional submission from our members or individual farmers.

Background

In August 2019, the Intergovernmental Agreement on Implementing Water Reform in the Murray-Darling Basin was amended to insert Schedule 3, relating to the Northern Basin Toolkit (The Toolkit).

The Toolkit comprises of a series of environmental measures to deliver improved environmental outcomes for the Murray-Darling Basin.

In March 2021, the Australian Government stated it would make an estimated total financial contribution of up to \$180 million (GST exclusive) to the Governments of New South Wales and

Queensland for approved project associated with the implementation of the environmental measures. The environmental measures were to be implemented by 30 June 2024.

In August 2023, a progress report published by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority reported that Measures 5 and 6 of the Toolkit would not be completed by June 2024.

Also, in August 2023, the relevant Australian, Queensland and New South Wales government Ministers agreed to extend the deadline for completion of the Toolkit Measures to 31 December 2026.

In December 2023, the Productivity Commission published its Murray-Darling Basin Plan Implementation review report. The Commission found that:

Delays implementing the northern Basin toolkit measures are a result of inadequate accountability for delivery, as well as a lack of oversight and review of the measures. Public information about project progress has been sparse, and there is no framework in place to monitor the environmental merits of these projects as they progress.

In October 2024, the Honourable Troy Grant, Inspector-General of Water Compliance, on his own initiative, decided to conduct an inquiry into the implementation of measures to improve environmental outcomes in the Northern Murray-Darling Basin set out in Schedule 3 of the Intergovernmental Agreement on Implementing Water Reform in the Murray Darling Basin, June 2013 and more recently amended in August 2019.

This decision is pursuant to section 239AA of the Water Act 2007 (Cth) (the “Water Act”) and for the purpose of performing the functions referred to in paragraphs 215C (1) (a) to (c) of the Water Act.

Response to the Call for Submissions

The QFF provides the following responses to questions raised by the Inspector-General of Water Compliance. QFF is unable to offer a response to questions 1 to 3 as our organisation serves as the representative body for agriculture in Queensland and is unable to provide regionally centric responses to the points raised.

Question 4

What has been your experiences with the delivery of specific projects under the Toolkit program? Have these projects met your expectations in terms of outcomes, timelines, or engagement?

The Queensland Farmers’ Federation members have experienced minimal involvement with the delivery or engagement of the Toolkit projects for proposed for implementation in Queensland.

Following a desk top review of the Northern Basin Toolkit measures and the information made publicly available, QFF have identified only one of the proposed projects is continuing to progress.

QFF have been unable to secure an interim project report for the Queensland Fish Friendly Water Extraction Project: *Condamine-Balonne and Border Rivers* information sourced from the

Queensland Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers suggests the project remains on track for completion within the timeline determined by the Australian Government.

Question 5

Do you consider the 2026 deadline for the full delivery of all six Toolkit measure to be realistic and achievable? If not, what alternative timeframe would you suggest, and why?

The QFF is of the position the initial timeline of June 2024 determined for the delivery of the six Toolkit measures and the extension of the deadline to 2026 may have been ambitious due to the many social, economic and climate factors that influenced the period between 2021 and 2024.

As the timeline for the initial scope of the Northern Basin project occurred during a period of temporary travel restrictions imposed by state jurisdictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, the QFF highlights the challenges associated in ground truthing project locations, sourcing technical expertise and collating the detailed business cases which for the major projects were submitted for consideration in April 2023.

The QFF is supportive of further examination of the initial detailed business cases put forward for consideration by the Queensland Government as we believe these projects may deliver meaningful environmental outcomes for the Basin.

The QFF is of the position the Northern Toolkit measures are the direction the government should be prioritising. Investing in complimentary infrastructure measures that improve the existing environmental water in the system will enable meaningful environmental outcomes for the multiple values of the river basin.

Question 6

Please comment on the levels of transparency regarding the progress and implementation of the Toolkit. If relevant, please provide details as to how communication, reporting and access to information could be improved.

The information made available to industry stakeholders and the broader public relating to the background and implementation of the measures in the Toolkit has been insufficient. The transparency, communication and reporting has failed to raise awareness and potential for community engagement in the Toolkit and deliver value to the investment to the regional communities.

The QFF have identified a total of two updates published to the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water website between August 2022 and August 2023. The updates were general in nature and provided little insight into the significant financial investment implementing measures to support the Basin in the Northern region.

QFF is supportive of improving the volume and opportunities for engagement with Northern Basin communities, especially where Landholders may be instrumental in the successful delivery of a project.

Question 7

Please comment on the extent and effectiveness of government agencies' engagement with stakeholders during both the planning and execution phases of Toolkit projects.

As Queensland has only benefitted from a single project approval, we are unable to make comment on the extent and effectiveness of the engagement with stakeholders.

The QFF welcomes the opportunity for future engagement and potential for collaboration with our members with relation to projects being considered for implementation in the Northern Basin.

Question 8

Please comment on the governance and oversight arrangements for the Toolkit, and whether you consider they are adequate to ensure accountability, transparency, and successful implementation.

While the QFF has no comments on the governance or potential oversights for the successful implementation of the Toolkit, we support the decision by the Inspector-General of Water Compliance to conduct this inquiry to investigate and address any systematic issues or challenges that have prevented the delivery of the suite of environmental initiatives.

We believe this exercise will go some ways to building stakeholder trust, reassuring farmers the government is committed to streamlining processes to improve intergovernmental collaboration for the Murray-Darling Basin and ensure future efforts and investments are well-coordinated, fair, and effective in achieving the environmental objectives that formed the basis of the Toolkit.

Conclusion

In the decision of the Inspector-General of Water Compliance to undertake the Northern Basin Toolkit Inquiry the QFF highlight the Toolkit is intended to deliver improved water management and environmental outcomes across the Northern Basin, with completion by the extended deadline of 31 December 2026.

The lack of progress and lack of measurable, reportable outcomes to community is concerning. The inquiry should seek to determine that the extension of timeframes and delivery of outcomes are efficient, effective, and transparent.

Without transparency and efficiency that considers the future interests of regional communities, there will continue to be a lack of confidence in the management of the Murray Darling Basin and outcomes through an inefficient and fragmented approach.

Agriculture in the Northern Basin continues to support government investment in environmental measures as sustainable farming practices and the wellbeing of rural communities remain intrinsically linked to healthy ecosystems.

Well-managed waterways should deliver reliable, high-quality water that protects the health of the Basin's systems, while supporting economic productivity in the rural communities dependent on the long-term viability of the agricultural sector.

If you have any queries about this submission, please do not hesitate to contact Ms Jo Martin at jo@qff.org.au.



Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'Jo Sheppard', is positioned below the closing text.

Jo Sheppard
Chief Executive Officer



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