



Assessment of
the Murrumbidgee upgraded
Catchment Action Plan

March 2013

Enquiries

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List of acronyms

CAP	Catchment Action Plan
CMA	Catchment Management Authority
NRC	Natural Resources Commission
NRM	Natural Resource Management
NSW	New South Wales

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Executive summary

The Natural Resources Commission (NRC) has reviewed the upgraded Murrumbidgee Catchment Action Plan (CAP), and assessed its potential to improve the long-term health and productivity of local landscapes and communities.

The Murrumbidgee region is facing a number of challenges including water reforms, changing demographics and invasive plants and animals that are impacting local landscapes and communities.

Key findings

The Murrumbidgee CAP provides a sound foundation for prioritising on-ground activities to improve productivity and landscape health in the catchment's sub-regions. It outlines priorities and actions that **address key risks and support communities** in the Murrumbidgee region to adapt to change.

The CAP recognises regional diversity, promotes localism and is likely to deliver improved local productivity and landscape health.

As a plan to **guide investment and on-ground activity**, the CAP:

- **resonates with stakeholders**, reflecting the success of targeted engagement and effective representation of community values and priorities
- presents landscapes, visions and strategies **supported by analysis** and application of scientific evidence and community knowledge
- sets out a hierarchy of goals, priorities and actions for each landscape that will help target investment at the sub-regional level and **support localised delivery**
- demonstrates a commitment to build landscape and community capacity to deal with change and **adapt to future uncertainty**.

To improve the upgraded CAP, the Catchment Management Authority (CMA) should:

- **clarify the strategic approach** at the regional scale
- **identify shared priorities** with stakeholders, particularly local and state government, which would increase the likelihood of actions contributing to multiple goals
- **identify targets** that provide accountability for the broad outcome statements and the CAP goals.

The CAP does include a comprehensive **implementation plan** that builds on strong community and industry support through the development of local action plans. The CMA has deferred further negotiation of shared priorities, roles and responsibilities to this implementation phase. The broad scope of these negotiations, and the complexity of the landscape framework in the CAP, means that developing local action plans will **require significant organisational effort**, potentially diverting resources away from on-ground activities.

Recommendation

The NRC recommends that the Minister approve the upgraded Murrumbidgee CAP with the following conditions:

- **clarify the strategic approach** at the regional scale
- **identify targets** that promote accountability for the broad outcome statements and the CAP goals
- **identify shared priorities** with government, industry and community stakeholders to increase the likelihood of actions contributing to multiple goals
- **review and adapt the CAP**, if required, to fit with Local Land Services boundaries, pending the final decision of the Minister.

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1 Introduction

The Natural Resources Commission (NRC) has reviewed the upgraded Murrumbidgee Catchment Action Plan (CAP), and assessed its potential to improve the long-term health and productivity of local landscapes and communities.

The Murrumbidgee region is located in southern NSW, forming part of the Murray-Darling Basin. It includes alpine areas in the east and rangeland systems in the west. Population growth in the upper catchment is leading to development pressures that are affecting resource condition, however, the western part of the catchment is experiencing population decline. The region supports a diversity of agricultural uses.

1.1 Background

CAPs are strategic regional plans for improving the health, productivity and resilience of landscapes and communities. CAPs identify what the community, industry, and government value about these landscapes, and explain what needs to be done to ensure long-term, sustainable management of a region's natural resources. Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) have primary responsibility for effectively implementing the CAPs in collaboration with their partners.

Under the *Natural Resources Commission Act 2003* (NSW), the NRC is required to assess CAPs and recommends them to the Minister for approval.

1.2 Focus of assessment

The focus of the NRC's assessment is to determine whether a CAP is a quality strategic plan that promotes the state-wide targets for natural resource management (NRM) and complies with the *Standard for Quality Natural Resource Management*¹ (the Standard).

The *Framework for assessing and recommending catchment action plans*² details the assessment criteria, attributes and process used. The NRC examined three key criteria in its assessment:

- 1 Was the plan developed using a structured, collaborative and adaptable planning process?
- 2 Does the plan use best available information to develop targets and actions for building resilient landscapes?
- 3 Is the CAP a plan for collaborative action and investment between government, community and industry partners?

The NRC collected evidence through extensive analysis of available documentation, technical reviews, stakeholder surveys, interviews and assessment of the CMA's engagement with government, industry and community partners (see Attachment 2 for details).

¹ The NSW Government adopted the *Standard for Quality Natural Resource Management*, which identifies seven components that are used to reach high-quality natural resource decisions. CMAs must comply with the Standard, using it as a quality assurance standard for all planning and implementation decisions.

² NRC, *Framework for assessing and recommending upgraded catchment action plans v2*, June 2012.

2 Summary of assessment findings

2.1 Planning

The development of the Murrumbidgee CAP included input from CMA staff members and the community, promoting localism through a shared understanding of the landscapes that stakeholders can relate to.

Strategic planning and capacity

The CAP reflects a clear shift in strategic direction from traditional NRM planning focussed on biophysical assets, to a more holistic, community-focussed plan that recognises the integration of NRM and the diverse values and aspirations for the region. An evaluation of the CMA's previous CAP has informed the upgraded CAP - and the CMA's updated business model - both of which facilitate community action and capacity building.

The strategic capacity of the CMA has increased through learning and applying current theory and analytical approaches. This has led to a better understanding of how the region functions and how it can best support regional communities and successful agricultural productivity. Inclusive CAP development workshops contributed to an organisation-wide understanding of the region's landscape systems. This approach to identifying key issues affecting the region builds on the CMA's existing knowledge and provides a good foundation for future planning and CAP implementation.

Collaborative CAP upgrade

The CMA worked collaboratively with community and industry representatives to develop the CAP, with stakeholders indicating that the CMA's engagement has improved since the development of the original CAP. The CMA recognised the region's diversity and the geographic distribution of communities, with 14 workshops held across the Murrumbidgee catchment (which were attended by over 250 community members). Stakeholders reported that they benefited from participation in these workshops. The CMA used online feedback mechanisms and electronic media to access a broader range of stakeholders and encourage participation. One-on-one meetings were also held to engage specific interest groups such as local government; industry representatives from Murrumbidgee Irrigation, Coleambally Irrigation and Rice Growers Australia; and indigenous stakeholders. Targeted engagement of interest groups (landholders, local councils, Landcare, government agencies and industry representatives) has contributed to a shared understanding of social, economic and environmental issues and community values in the region.

Development of CAP goals was informed by the broad and representative community engagement, which also contributed to a shared understanding of social, economic and environmental issues and community values.

The collaborative engagement process provides a foundation for devolved decision-making and a sound basis for implementing the CAP. However, the plan would have been improved by taking this effort forward into identifying and agreeing on shared priorities with stakeholders, particularly those of local and state governments.

Adaptability

The upgraded CAP includes a high-level adaptive management plan to deal with change, manage risk and incorporate new knowledge as it becomes available. It also provides a clear

framework for monitoring and evaluating a range of indicators at both organisational and project levels. While the plan is underpinned by principles designed to manage shocks and develop ways to adapt, the five year review schedule may not provide adequate flexibility to deal with uncertainty.

2.2 Targets

The Murrumbidgee CAP provides thorough analysis and identification of its various landscapes at a local scale, but stops short of presenting a comprehensive whole-of-region model. It presents outcome statements that will be developed into targets at the implementation stage.

Best-available information

The analysis underpinning the CAP is based on best-available information, a comprehensive evidence base, scientific rigour and a detailed consideration of community knowledge and values. Technical expert panels advised the CMA on this analysis and helped to identify appropriate interventions for landscape improvement. This process clearly directed priorities and actions towards achieving social, economic and environmental outcomes that flow logically from the analysis. Knowledge gaps and actions to address them were also identified.

Analysis of social, economic and environmental information

The CMA used robust spatial analysis and community engagement to identify 10 overlapping landscapes that reflect the diversity of the Murrumbidgee region. Six broad catchment goals were identified from the social, economic and environmental themes that emerged through community workshops.

The CMA also identified seven systems to help it gain a better understanding of how the landscapes function and identify appropriate interventions for investment. While the identification of these systems was based on robust evidence, the complex analytical framework means that interactions between the ten landscapes are not explicit in the CAP, with the exception of river connectivity. Furthermore, the CAP does not specify the system components that are relevant to each landscape. Technical expert panels examined the models produced from the analysis. They helped the CMA understand how social, economic and environmental components interact within and between landscapes. While the analysis was thorough, it did not lead to a clear explanation of landscape relationships, the inclusion of a regional model in the CAP, or the recognition of broader-scale systems extending across CMA boundaries.

The robust analysis underpinning the CAP demonstrates a substantial understanding of landscape function and the key issues affecting communities, natural resource health and productivity of the region. The interventions derived from this analysis are logical and demonstrate how biophysical systems can be improved to support productivity and community values. A technical reviewer confirmed that the analysis of social, economic and environmental interdependencies at the sub-regional scale sets a solid platform for directly addressing issues of community capacity building. However, the CAP's ability to guide regional-scale investment could be improved by clearly defining how the region functions as a whole.

The NRC recommends approval of the Murrumbidgee CAP with the following **condition**:

- to clarify the strategic approach at a regional scale.

Hierarchy of goals, strategies and targets

The CAP presents a clear hierarchy of goals and priorities for the region and its landscapes that will help target investment at the sub-regional level and support localised delivery. The CMA has identified key goals and supporting actions for each of the region's ten landscapes. These goals are based on the values and concerns raised at community workshops. However, these catchments goals could be defined more clearly to distinguish between each goal.

Priorities and actions are logically nested against each goal allowing stakeholders and delivery partners to readily identify priorities for each sub-region. Shared priorities need to be agreed during the implementation stage to facilitate effective on-ground works. This approach addresses the uniqueness of each Murrumbidgee landscape. For example, the landscape of the irrigation areas presents clear priorities for water use efficiency and farm profitability; whereas the Lower Murrumbidgee floodplain landscape includes priorities for improving aquatic ecosystem functionality, water flow and water quality to support community and ecosystem values.

Accountability

The CMA has adopted 'Outcome statements' for each CAP goal in preference to adopting specific measurable targets, which were found to be ineffective in the first CAP. The CMA's strategy is to ensure the CAP remains relevant and flexible to accommodate changing investor preferences. As the outcome statements are very broad and it is unclear what indicators will be used, it will be difficult to report on what has been achieved against the CAP outcomes. The CMA plans to develop detailed, measurable targets during the CAP implementation stage, which will strengthen accountability.

The NRC recommends approval of the Murrumbidgee CAP with the following **condition**:

- to identify targets that promote accountability for the broad outcome statements against CAP goals.

2.3 Action and investment

The Murrumbidgee CAP provides a reasonable foundation for guiding collaborative actions and includes a framework for governing the plan's implementation. However, the CAP's ability to effectively direct investment by delivery partners could be improved by identifying partner priorities; being clearer about roles and responsibilities; and providing more clarity on where and how investment will be prioritised across landscapes.

Alignment with partner plans and strategies

The CAP defers the strategic alignment of policies, strategies and plans with delivery partners until the implementation stage, and common objectives have not been explicitly considered or agreed. Additionally, a technical reviewer noted 'stakeholder identification needs to be more detailed'. For example, the CAP does not specify key stakeholder groups. Without a clear set of shared priorities, the ability of the plan to meaningfully guide partnerships, particularly with local and state governments, may be compromised. As a result, the CAP is not well positioned to deliver the anticipated social, economic and environmental outcomes.

While a number of stakeholders - including industry representatives - have expressed support for the CAP in directing investment, there are stakeholder concerns regarding the lack of clarity on shared investment priorities. Local government representatives noted that the lack of agreed

shared priorities potentially hampers coordination with Community Strategic Plans. The NSW Office of Water also identifies the lack of shared priorities as an issue needing further coordination with the CMA.

Notwithstanding this, the Department of Primary Industries, the Department of Planning and Infrastructure, the Office of Environment and Heritage, and Aboriginal Affairs NSW have endorsed the CAP, confirming that it 'is not inconsistent with the relevant natural resource management policies, plans and strategies'. The CAP goals and outcomes logically align with the *NSW 2021* goals³ and the state-wide targets for NRM. The CMA will continue alignment activities with its key delivery partners.

Roles and responsibilities

The upgraded CAP identifies key delivery partners for each CAP goal rather than for actions, and defers defining specific roles and responsibilities until the implementation stage. The lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities for delivering CAP actions - together with inconsistent support from delivery partners - weakens the plan's capacity to direct investment and deliver productivity and landscape health outcomes.

The CMA has established an 'Interagency Panel' to pursue a whole-of-government approach to CAP implementation. This will provide a good basis for cooperation, however it will require further development to effectively coordinate partner investment and deliver on-ground benefits that align with the CAP goals. The CMA intends to expand membership of the panel to include industry representatives and develop shared priorities.

The NRC recommends approval of the Murrumbidgee CAP with the following **condition**:

- to identify shared priorities with government, industry and community stakeholders to increase the likelihood of actions contributing to multiple goals.

Implementation

The CAP includes a sound framework for governing its implementation at the catchment, sub-regional landscape and project levels. The establishment of landscape working groups comprising community, technical, agency and CMA representatives is a welcome initiative. The implementation framework also outlines a logical strategy for spatial prioritisation to guide investment decisions.

The deferment of a substantial range of decisions to the implementation stage and the establishment of local action plans will require significant organisational effort, particularly given the complexity of the landscape model - with 10 landscapes and seven social, economic and environmental systems. This has the potential to divert resources away from on-ground activities, achieving fewer outcomes within reasonable timeframes and constraining effectiveness.

³ www.2021.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/NSW2021_Plan%20Goals_0.pdf

3 Recommendation

3.1 Approval

In accordance with section 13 (b) of the *Natural Resources Commission Act 2003* (NSW), the NRC recommends that the Minister approve the upgraded Murrumbidgee Catchment Action Plan with conditions.

3.2 Conditions of approval

The NRC recommends approval of the Murrumbidgee upgraded CAP with the following conditions to:

- clarify the strategic approach at a regional scale
- identify targets that promote accountability for the broad outcome statements and the CAP goals
- identify shared priorities with government, industry and community stakeholders to increase the likelihood of actions contributing to multiple goals
- review and adapt the CAP, if required, to fit with Local Land Services boundaries, pending the final decision of the Minister.

The CMA should report to the NRC on how it has met these conditions of approval in its Strategic Progress Letters. Commencing September 2013, the CMA should provide the NRC with a Strategic Progress Letter annually, or as conditions are met.

3.3 Additional suggested actions for the CMA

There are no suggested actions for the CMA.

3.4 Readiness for transition to Local Land Services

Several aspects of the Murrumbidgee CAP upgrade will assist the CMA to manage the transition to the new Local Land Services structure:

- The strong consultative approach has captured the views of farmers, industry groups, landholders and interested community groups which have been reflected in the CAP. Consequently, extensive community consultation would not be required in order to reflect potential Local Land Services boundary changes.
- The identification and analysis of sub-regional landscapes has led to localised targets and goals that would withstand an institutional restructure and could be adopted into a different strategic plan.
- The scientific, industry, and community knowledge supporting the CAP is a valuable resource for new regional organisations.

However, there may be some challenges in managing the transition to the new Local Land Services structure, including:

- the need for a stronger regional-level strategy to drive investment prioritisation
- insufficient cross-border engagement or alignment with neighbouring CMAs during the CAP upgrade process.

Attachment 1 - Detailed assessment findings

Criterion 1 - Plan was developed using a structured, collaborative and adaptable planning process

Attribute 1A: Strategic planning process was logical, comprehensive and transparent

The upgraded CAP reflects a shift in the strategic approach to NRM that will support the region's communities to adapt to change. The CMA's new business model for improving community-based service delivery will help to facilitate this. Representatives from the CMA Board and senior management were able to articulate the role of the CAP in guiding the CMA's strategic planning processes and were able to identify emerging issues affecting the region. They demonstrated a clear understanding of the systems-based thinking underpinning the CAP. Adopting a new business model for community-based service and capacity building - combined with methodologies for understanding landscape function - has improved the CMA's strategic capability.

Strengths

- By transitioning away from a traditional NRM planning that focussed on biophysical assets, the CMA Board and staff members have improved their understanding of the region's systems.
- The CMA Board and staff members have a better understanding of how the region functions and can now better support regional communities and agricultural production.

Attribute 1B: Planning process meaningfully engaged the community, Governments and other stakeholders

Engaging a range of interest groups during the CAP upgrade increased stakeholder opportunities to participate in strategic planning for the region and provided a foundation for CAP implementation. However, engagement with local and state government agencies lost momentum. As a result, the CAP does not identify shared priorities of all delivery partners, although the CMA established an interagency panel late in the CAP upgrade to begin this process. The majority of community representatives were able to relate to the landscapes identified for the region, indicating that the CAP engagement process captured their values. A number of stakeholders were positive about their involvement in the CAP upgrade and agreed that their relationships with the CMA had improved. However, some potential delivery partners indicated that they do not intend to use the CAP to guide their NRM activities and investment. This is partly due to the different priorities and core businesses of potential delivery partners and the lack of specificity in CAP priorities. Stakeholders did however agree that the engagement process was valuable as it promoted broader community collaboration.

Strengths

- The engagement process provides a strong foundation for CAP implementation by reinvigorating stakeholder relationships and engaging industry representatives.

Weaknesses/gaps

- Some local and state government stakeholders were not consistently engaged throughout the CAP upgrade, which affected the CAP's ability to identify shared priorities.

Attribute 1C: An adaptive planning process is in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan and to guide improvements as knowledge improves and/or circumstances change

Adaptive management is a clear imperative for ongoing CAP improvement; however, defining a process for CAP review has been deferred until the implementation phase. A third party comprehensively reviewed the first CAP and the CMA incorporated key lessons learned into the CAP upgrade. The CAP implementation structure outlines rolling three-year investment strategies and a robust monitoring, evaluation and reporting (MER) framework, which are intended as mechanisms for adaptive management. The MER framework is designed to keep CAP implementation relevant at the project and organisation levels. It is also intended to help manage risks to CAP implementation and capture new knowledge for evaluating management priorities over time. The CAP is due to be reviewed every five years, but this schedule will not adequately provide the flexibility to remain relevant.

Strengths

- A well-structured MER framework is in place to support CAP implementation and improvement, and enable adaptability.
- The upgraded CAP was informed by a risk assessment of factors that may influence its implementation.

Weaknesses/gaps

- The upgraded CAP does not identify flexible review points to help the CMA deal with uncertainty.
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Criterion 2 - Plan uses best available information to develop targets and actions for building resilient landscapes

Attribute 2A: Plan describes the social-ecological systems operating in the catchment using best available science and knowledge of community values

The upgraded CAP clearly describes the region's social-ecological systems (landscapes) and is underpinned by a comprehensive evidence base. Landscapes were identified through robust spatial analysis and systems analysis incorporating sound scientific research. The state and transition models underpinning the CAP are well researched. Community values are embedded in the systems analysis, flowing through to catchment goals and landscape visions. The systems analysis also incorporates the input of technical expert panels, providing confidence that technical rigour has been applied in developing the CAP. The plan also considers some regional scale interactions, such as Aboriginal songlines and riverine interactions. The CMA has endeavoured to identify and address knowledge gaps that emerged during the CAP upgrade and has integrated identified gaps into the CMA's knowledge strategy.

Strengths

- The CMA logically identified social-ecological systems (landscapes) through sound spatial analysis (considering institutional, economic, social and biophysical boundaries) supported by a comprehensive scientific evidence base.
- Stakeholders strongly relate to the identified landscapes, indicating that the ecosystem services valued by the region's communities have informed the systems analysis.
- The CMA has addressed gaps in knowledge or identified them for incorporation in the CMA's Knowledge Strategy.

Weaknesses/gaps

- Interactions between landscapes are not explicit in the CAP, reflecting a lack of analysis at the regional scale and creating the risk that important cross-scale interactions may have been missed.
-

Attribute 2B: Plan integrates biophysical and socio-economic information to analyse the systems operating in the catchment and develop strategies for improving landscape function and resilience

The upgraded CAP is underpinned by a robust analysis of the systems that comprise the region. The CAP identifies 10 overlapping landscapes and seven systems that are components of these landscapes. A CAP strength is its focus on interdependencies between social, economic and environmental factors at the sub-regional scale. This is particularly evident in how the CAP addresses community capacity building and equitable access. However, the CAP does not specify which systems relate to each landscape. While the analytical framework is complex, it led to the identification of interventions designed to address the key drivers of change. Landscape interventions are logical and reflect the CMA's understanding of how biophysical systems can be improved and managed to support community values; however, the CAP does not effectively present strategies that are relevant to the whole region.

Strengths

- The state and transition models clearly present the relationships between social and biophysical components of the landscapes.
- The systems analysis identified realistic interventions that are likely to contribute to improving natural resource condition.
- The systems analysis explicitly identified industry drivers of change.

Weaknesses/gaps

- The analysis did not lead to a clear explanation of landscape relationships.
- The CAP does not include a whole-of-region model for guiding regional-scale investment.

Attribute 2C: Plan proposes targets and actions that are logically nested and supported by the available evidence

The upgraded CAP logically nests priorities and actions against key catchment goals for each landscape; however, detailed target setting is deferred until the CAP implementation stage. This deferment was a deliberate decision to ensure the ongoing relevance of the CAP in a changing operating environment. Six broad catchment goals and associated outcomes statements replace the more specific targets that were found to be ineffective in the first CAP. This approach should help the CMA tailor management actions and associated investment options to align with stakeholder and investor preferences at particular points in time. Conversely, lack of specificity in targets detracts from the CAP's ability to meaningfully guide the activity of partners and investors.

Strengths

- Management priorities and actions are logically nested against catchment goals for each of the region's landscapes.

Weaknesses/gaps

- Targets have not been established at the landscape scale. Instead detailed target setting is deferred until the CAP is implementation via the proposed local action plans. This proposal does not yet have the full support of stakeholders and establishing specific targets is likely to be an onerous process.
- The identified catchment outcomes are too broad to be measurable.

Criterion 3 - CAP is a plan for collaborative action and investment between Government, community and industry partners

Attribute 3A: Plan aligns with relevant policies and community aspirations

The upgraded CAP reflects community aspirations for the region; however, it was not informed by a logical or comprehensive analysis of the relevant NRM plans and policies of partner organisations. The CAP defers detailed alignment of the CAP with relevant plans, policies and strategies until the CAP implementation stage. Although the CAP supporting documentation includes a register of plans and policies relevant to catchment goals, it does not identify where alignment is most appropriate to address the shared priorities of delivery partners. For example, the CAP does not explore common objectives with local government. This creates a risk that the CAP will not function as a whole-of-government strategic plan and NRM effort may not be effectively coordinated. Also, stakeholders and the CMA may not understand policy conflicts and project delivery could be compromised. Notwithstanding this, key state government agencies have endorsed the CAP, stating that it is not inconsistent with their relevant NRM plans, policies and strategies. CAP goals and outcomes are also logically matched with state-wide NRM targets and the *NSW 2021* goals.

Strengths

- The CAP goals and visions reflect community aspirations for the region.

Weaknesses/gaps

- The CMA's register of policies and plans does not identify where alignment is most important, nor does it identify barriers to alignment.
- The CAP does not identify common priorities of relevant plans or policies.
- The CMA's engagement with adjacent CMAs was limited, reducing cross-boundary collaboration.

Attribute 3B. Plan can meaningfully guide Governments, industry and the community to align effort across the region

The upgraded CAP provides clear priorities and a governance framework for collaborative action and investment to improve the natural resources valued by the region's communities. The landscape-based approach resonates with stakeholders, who can identify priorities and actions for their individual landscapes and for the region. Spatial mapping helps CAP readers understand the CAP priorities. However, the CAP does not clearly identify key stakeholder groups, potentially reducing the reader's sense of connection with the CAP.

The CAP envisages the development of local action plans that support localism; however development of 10 individual local action plans may not be realistic considering the organisational effort required. The CAP planning hierarchy does not identify the strategies and actions developing these plans. Furthermore, there is no indication of support for the framework from the stakeholders on which the CAP's success depends. These considerations diminish confidence that this governance model will effectively guide CAP implementation.

Strengths

- The upgraded CAP outlines a clear framework for guiding plan implementation that supports localism.
- The CAP is designed to guide community and organisational effort in NRM at the landscape scale by identifying coordinated opportunities for NRM delivery.

Weakness/gaps

- The CAP defers the strategic alignment necessary to support CAP delivery until the implementation phase.
- The CAP does not clearly identify relevant stakeholder groups.
- There is currently no evidence that delivery partners support the governance framework proposed for implementing the plan.

Attribute 3C: Plan specifies agreed roles and responsibilities for partners in the catchment

The upgraded CAP identifies key delivery partners and collaborators that will contribute to realising the CAP goals. Delivery partners are logically grouped against catchment goals. For example, industry and agribusiness are listed as contributing to 'landscape productivity' and 'adaptability' goals. The CMA intends to identify specific roles and common priorities during the CAP implementation phase, using investment and business planning in local action plans. The risk in this approach is that the CAP is too vague to effectively guide the investment planning decisions of delivery partners or to promote accountability for implementing the CAP. In addition, there is no evidence that delivery partners - with the exception of state government agencies - agree to their assigned roles.

Strengths

- The CAP broadly defines roles for delivering the six high level CAP goals, which were derived through a consultation process that included an inter-agency workshop.

Weaknesses/gaps

- Transparency and accountability for CAP implementation could be improved by matching delivery partners with specific management actions that consider their strengths.
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Attachment 2 - About the assessment

Assessment objective

The objective of the NRC’s assessment is to determine whether a CAP is a quality strategic plan that promotes the state-wide targets for NRM and complies with the *Standard for Quality Natural Resource Management*⁴ (the Standard).

Assessment criteria

Following extensive consultation, the NRC developed the *Framework for assessing and recommending catchment action plans*⁵ which was endorsed by the NSW Government Senior Officer Group for NRM. To define the criteria and expectations, the NRC examined the external context (institutional, spatial and temporal). It identified elements expected of a high quality strategic NRM planning process and final plan, within the context of the Standard. The NRC trialled and refined the criteria through a pilot process involving CMAs and agencies.

The NRC then determined what represents an acceptable level of performance against the criteria at a specific point in time, considering factors and risks specific to the CAP and the region it covers as well as the maturity and development of the regional model as a whole, including the comparative performance of other CMAs.

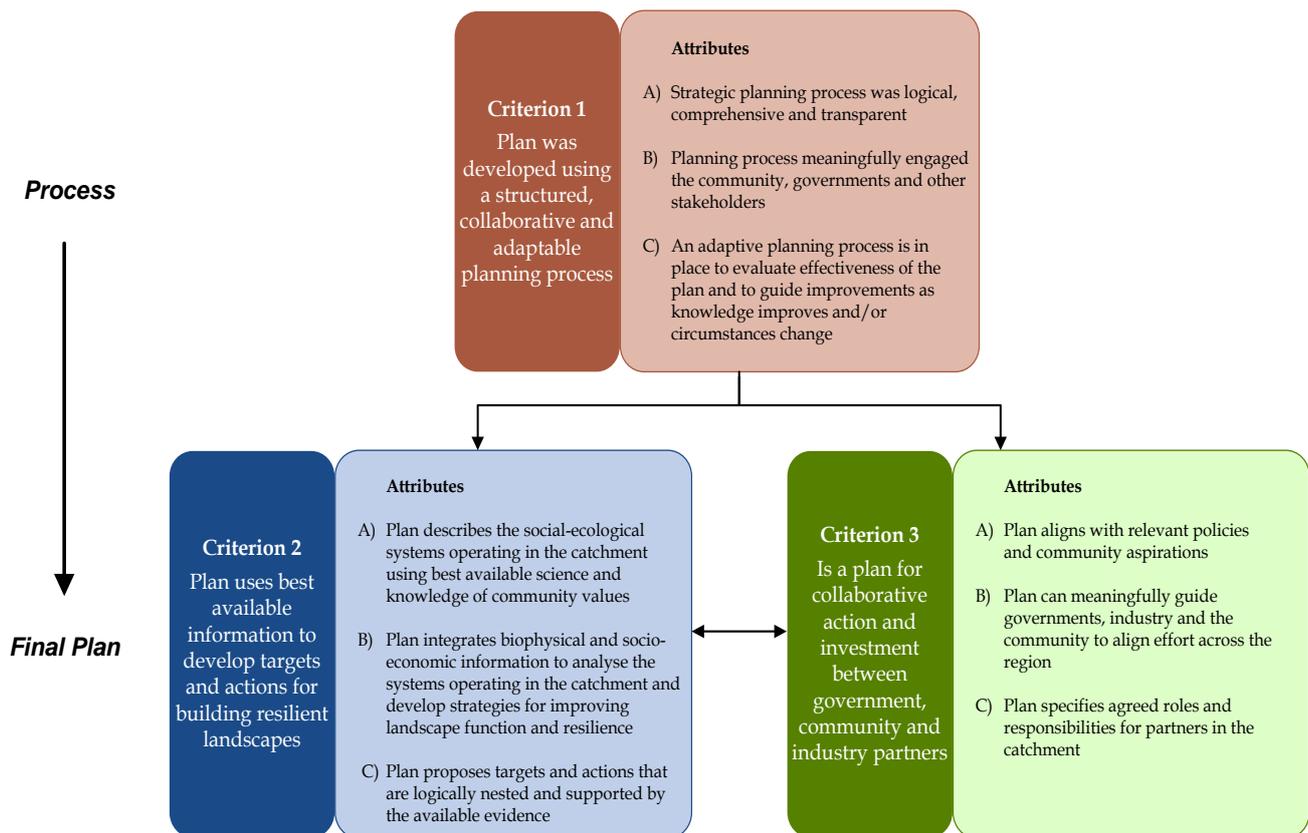


Figure 2.1: Criteria to assess whether the CAP is a quality, strategic natural resource management plan

⁴ The NSW Government adopted the *Standard for Quality Natural Resource Management*, which identifies seven components that are used to reach high-quality natural resource decisions. CMAs must comply with the Standard, using it as a quality assurance standard for all planning and implementation decisions.

⁵ NRC, *Framework for assessing and recommending upgraded catchment action plans v2*, June 2012

Assessment methodology

The NRC assessment team followed the methodologies set out in the *Framework for assessing and recommending catchment action plans v2, June 2012*.

The CAPs were assessed in progressive phases, including preliminary assessment of evidence prior to formal submission and a full review when the CAP was formally submitted. The NRC sent the assessment reports to CMAs for consultation before they were finalised.

Assessment approach

The NRC's assessment of the CAP involved collecting evidence and consulting with government agencies, CMAs and other stakeholders. The methods and activities used to collect and analyse evidence against the criteria for the Murrumbidgee CAP included:

- pre-assessment engagement with the CMAs to identify characteristics of the region that influence CAP development, such as major issues and institutional structures
- desktop analysis of the plan, planning approach, community consultation and scientific knowledge used in developing the plan
- interviews with two CMA Board members, three senior managers and one staff
- seven surveys and five interviews with stakeholders, including with representatives of industry, local government, landholders and non-government groups
- government agency consultation
- four external reviews of the analysis underpinning the targets, conducted by consultants with expertise in ecology and environmental science, social science and environmental economics.

Acknowledgements

The audit team gratefully acknowledges the cooperation and assistance provided by the Murrumbidgee CMA, and agencies and stakeholders in the region. In particular, we wish to thank the Murrumbidgee CMA Board, General Manager and staff.

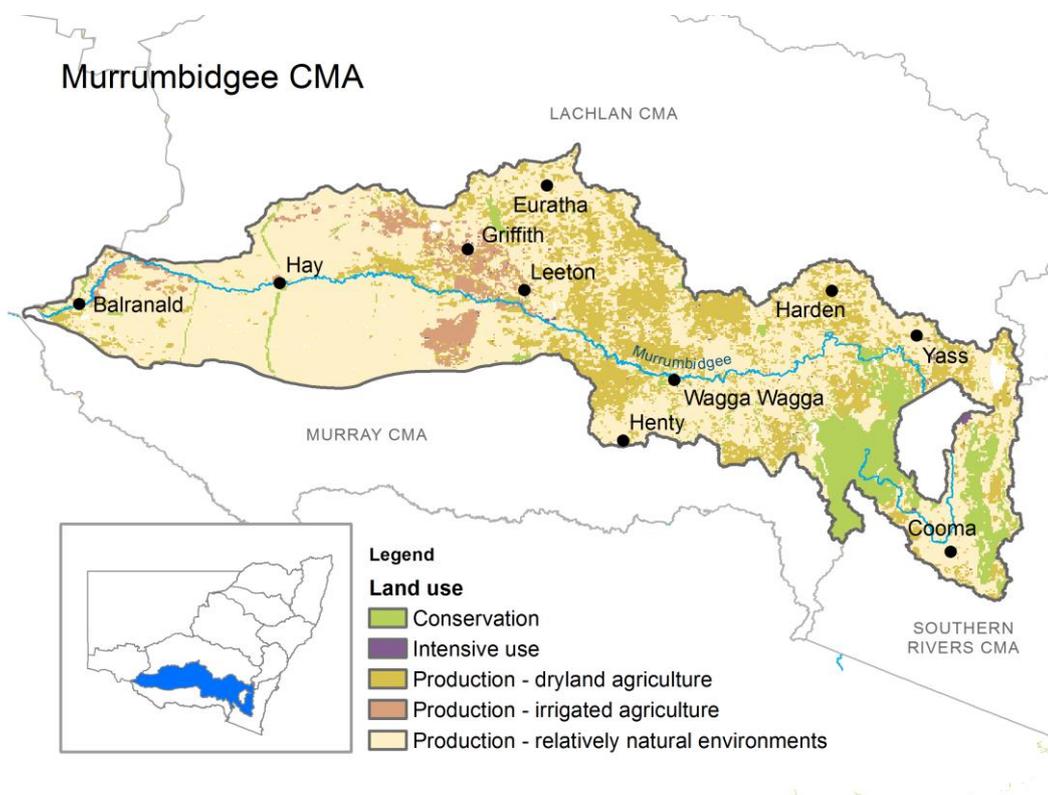
Attachment 3 - About the region

The Murrumbidgee catchment is located in southern NSW and covers an area of 84,000 square kilometres. It has one of the most diverse climates in NSW, ranging from the alpine areas of Kosciuszko National Park and the Monaro plains, through to the rich grazing and grain belts of the South West Slopes and Plains and the shrublands and grasslands of the semi-arid Western Riverina.

This inland region is part of the Murray-Darling Basin. It is bordered by the Murray catchment to the south, the Southern Rivers catchment to the east and the Lachlan catchment to the north. The region supports a population of around 600,000 people, including approximately 350,000 people in the Australian Capital Territory.

Agricultural production in the region is worth in excess of \$1.9 billion annually. The irrigation industry provides 25 per cent of NSW's fruit and vegetable production, 42 per cent of the state's grapes and half of Australia's rice production. Other major industries in the region include dryland agriculture, such as beef production, intensive poultry production, sheep and wool, cropping, softwood plantations and tourism.

The region's economic prosperity is dependent on the health of natural resources, including the health of the Murrumbidgee River and its tributaries. A number of the region's rivers are regulated to deliver water to downstream towns and agricultural enterprises, including irrigators. The region includes wetlands of national and international significance.⁶



⁶ Source: Murrumbidgee Catchment Action Plan and Murrumbidgee website www.murrumbidgee.cma.nsw.gov.au/about/catchment.aspx viewed 25 February 2013.

