



Lake Eyre Basin Secretariat

Email: lebsecretariat@agriculture.gov.au

Date: 4th November 2022

Re: Submission to the Draft Lake Eyre Basin Strategic Plan

Dear Sir or Madam,

Please accept this submission to the Draft Lake Eyre Basin Strategic Plan (LEBSP), which was released for public consultation on 17 August 2022. As the State-based conservation organisations recognised by the Lake Eyre Basin (LEB) Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) as the principal “voices” for the conservation sector with regard to the Lake Eyre Basin, the Queensland Conservation Council (QCC), Arid Land Environment Centre (ALEC) and the Conservation Council of South Australia (CCSA) welcome the opportunity to provide this submission to the draft LEBSP.

1. General comments:

- As it is currently written, the draft LEB SP is superficial, pitched at a too general level, and does not address with sufficient detail, accuracy or specificity the various threats to the Basin identified in section 5 of the document;
- In adopting a ten-year life span, the draft LEB SP is too limited in its vision and ambition, particularly with respect to considering the likely impacts of climate change on the ecological and hydrological values of the Basin between now and 2050 (which require the identification of adaptation strategies now);
- The draft LEB SP is essentially no more than “a plan to make a plan” insofar as it defers the identification of “priority actions and specific activities” to five-year implementation plans, which are to be “informed by a risk-based understanding of issues of cross-jurisdictional concern”; this proposed approach:
 - does not indicate any clear link between the LEB SP and the first implementation plan, but rather suggests the latter will be based on a separate “understanding” of risks to be developed across the Basin jurisdictions; and

- does not explain the process that will be followed in order to develop and adopt implementation plans, in particular the extent to which public consultation will be pursued.
- The governance arrangements for the LEB, which are currently under review should be resolved prior to the adoption of the LEB SP, to enable the re-establishment of a successor to the Ministerial Forum (which was abolished in 2021) to perform this task. This is critical to ensuring clear ownership of the LEB SP by all jurisdictions.

2. Unsuitable for consultation

The draft LEB SP lacks accurate, specific information, thus rendering it unsuitable for consultation purposes. Its unengaging nature also limits the likelihood of its key elements being properly scrutinised. Coupled with the lack of a comprehensive public consultation process, including suitable opportunities for all stakeholders to participate, the draft plan is not sufficient for gaining informed consent.

While a “plan to make a plan” at face value is innocuous, the consequences are lasting and significant. The vision, goals and objectives therefore need to be much more fully articulated.

3. Specific comments

3.1 Name

Subject to custodians support, it is appropriate to use the term Kati Thanda and not Lake Eyre throughout, including in the title. This is respectful, more inspiring and avoids further entrenching the name Lake Eyre.

3.2 Contents section

As it is currently written, the contents section of the draft LEBSP does not align with the substance of the draft plan. In particular it overlooks Section 2 (“About the Lake Eyre Basin and its Management”), resulting in a mis-numbering of sections 2-6.

3.3 Vision

The vision is uninspiring. There is an opportunity for Kati Thanda to be globally recognised as an internationally significant (environmentally and culturally) river system in relatively intact condition and for this to constitute a rallying point for a serious commitment to basin-scale measures to protect Kati Thanda and improve economic and social outcomes. The vision fails to reflect this opportunity.

If this plan is to genuinely celebrate Aboriginal culture and knowledge, as proposed in Goal 2, recognition of a “two-way” understanding and commitment to compatible management principles, developed using co-design principles, should be embedded in the vision statement (and MERI framework). Failure to do so means that, at its core, this Strategic Plan is a “one way” document.

3.4 Section 3: A strategic plan for the Lake Eyre Basin

See the general comments above regarding the limited lifespan of the plan and the absence of information about the process to be adopted in developing five-year implementation plans. The diagram presented at p.4 indicates that the plan will “inform” the actions to be identified in the implementation plans but, as noted above, a contrary suggestion is provided at p.3 concerning some form of separate “understanding” that will serve the same purpose. This suggests there is confusion on the part of the writers of the draft LEB SP concerning how implementation of the proposed 5-year implementation plans will be developed.

3.5 Section 5: Threats in the Basin

This section of the draft LEBSP purports to be based on two reviews of the Basin’s environmental condition: the 2016 State of the Basin Condition Assessment published by the LEB Ministerial Forum in 2017; and a more recent Queensland government report: McDougall, A. et al, *Lake Eyre Basin Environmental Risk Assessment 2021*, available at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3020425873/view> .

However, unlike both reviews, the draft plan does not attempt to prioritise the risks it identifies and presents a “sanitised” version of some risks, while also overlooking others completely.

More specifically, the short section on land and water degradation fails to clearly acknowledge the following “higher risk threats” identified by McDougall et al:

- High total grazing pressure from livestock, feral pests and native graziers, or in combination,
- Disturbance to water features by feral animals and livestock and,
- lack of data, information and certainty.

On the first two of the above points, the draft LEB SP simply notes that “pastoral leaseholders are required to manage land in ways that prevent further land degradation”, which completely ignores the fact that the abovementioned threats are not currently being adequately managed under such legislation.

This section should also specifically describe risks from invasive pasture grasses, notably buffel grass, which is benchmarked as the greatest threat to biodiversity in the arid zone¹, is the threatening process of greatest concern to Aboriginal people² and threatens 70% of Australia, including most of the LEB.

Furthermore, the description of risks diminishes the urgency for decisive action to arrest ecosystem decline and collapse³ and the loss of threatened species, as was starkly highlighted in the recent national State of the Environment report.

On the third threat, the draft LEB SP is completely silent on how this deficiency will be addressed, apart from oblique references to “the MERI framework” without any accompanying explanation of the current status of this framework, its future development, or the resources required to implement the framework.

The section on climate change in the draft LEB SP provides a number of observations concerning the possible sensitivity of the Basin’s riverine ecosystems to climate change (less water volume, soil moisture decline, loss of threatened native species, and shifts in the distribution of many invasive species) without providing any scientific references in support, apart from the IPCC’s 2021 Summary for Policymakers. Neither of the reviews cited in the draft LEB SP offer adequate insights in this regard either. There is a clear need for the plan to be underpinned by additional scientific assessment of the likely impacts of climate change on the ecology and hydrology of the Lake Eyre Basin (LEB) over the next 30 or more years, for example, through the Bureau of Meteorology.

There is an additional question as to the potential contribution to climate change of activities within the Basin, in particular unconventional gas extraction, which involves substantial “fugitive” emissions created during extraction that are additional to those associated with the use of gas as an energy source. The extent to which state and national targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and 2050, in accordance with the Paris Agreement, could be undermined by the expansion of such activities in the LEB (in particular, unconventional gas extraction) is not addressed in the draft LEB SP.

Groundwater extraction is also identified by MacDougall et al as a higher risk threat, but this receives only a one paragraph discussion in Section 5 under the heading “hydrologic alteration”, which highlights the overall failure of the draft LEB SP to interconnect or integrate its objectives with those of the far more expansive Great Artesian Basin Strategic Management Plan 2019-2034.

Under the heading “Mining and petroleum”, Section 5 addresses oil and gas developments and references two Commonwealth bioregional assessments published respectively in 2018 and 2021. In particular, it notes (at p.3) that the 2021 assessment concluded that the impacts of shale and tight gas activities “could be mitigated through ongoing compliance

¹ <https://theconversation.com/the-buffel-kerfuffle-how-one-species-quietly-destroys-native-wildlife-and-cultural-sites-in-arid-australia-149456>

² <https://theconversation.com/the-buffel-kerfuffle-how-one-species-quietly-destroys-native-wildlife-and-cultural-sites-in-arid-australia-149456>

³ <https://theconversation.com/existential-threat-to-our-survival-see-the-19-australian-ecosystems-already-collapsing-154077>

with existing regulatory and management controls”. This conclusion aligns with the conclusion by McDougall et al that gas, coal, petroleum/oil activities, while potentially having impacts of high consequence, have only a low likelihood of occurring within the next ten years due to the inaccessibility of the resources, that prospects are highly localised, and that “current controls are considered to be adequate”.

The assumption in these reports that the existing regulatory frameworks of LEB jurisdictions concerning unconventional gas activities are adequate to manage potential impacts is highly questionable. This concern has been reinforced by the recent journal publication by Kingsford and Walburn, “Oil and Gas Exploration and Development in the Lake Eyre Basin”, CSIRO Publishing, 2022, which documents the impacts of some 831 gas wells (and related roads) on river systems in the LEB. It concludes that “little rigorous environmental assessment (of these activities) existed, despite state and Commonwealth legislation and policy”.

In discussing the threat posed by future oil and gas activities in the LEB, this section of the final LEB SP should acknowledge the unreliability of assumptions that existing regulatory frameworks are adequate. It should also note that, over a longer time scale than ten years, there is considerable scientific evidence to support the conclusion that such activities pose a very high level of threat to the ecological and hydrological values of the LEB - as acknowledged, for example, by McDougall et al.

Also, the assumption in the reports cited in the draft LEB SP that such activities are unlikely to be pursued within the Basin should be questioned, given recent pressure on global gas supplies arising from the conflict in Ukraine and ongoing concerns within Australia about domestic gas supply. These factors should be recognised as increasing the pressure to expand conventional and unconventional gas production in the LEB, which should be recognised as requiring the introduction of clear and comprehensive policy settings regarding the suitability of allowing gas development to increase across the LEB.

3.6 Section 6: Goals and Objectives

The four goals identified in section 6 of the draft LEB SP and their corresponding objectives are worded in an extremely broad manner that does not provide sufficient, detailed guidance in relation to the specific actions and activities that are to be developed through the proposed 5-year implementation plans. In many, if not most instances, the objectives are little more than a slight expansion of the relevant goal. There is nothing provided in the draft LEB SP that resemble objective, measurable targets against which the achievement of the LEB SP goals can be measured.

This approach contrasts sharply with that adopted in the Great Artesian Basin Strategic Management plan, which sets out a range of “principles”, each of which has detailed objectives and related outcomes of a specific nature – all of which are intended to inform a subsequent implementation plan.

As a result, this section of the draft LEB SP needs to be substantially revised and expanded upon, for example:

(i) Goal 1 - Healthy river systems supporting resilient landscapes

The objectives under this goal in the draft LEB SP can be summarised as follows:

- Regarding threatening processes: pursue a cross-jurisdictional and community effort, combined with appropriate policies and investment, together with coordinated research and other initiatives and,
- Regarding water availability: continue to manage water resources well

As currently written, these statements are little more than platitudes and lack real substance. As a consequence, the objectives under goal 1 of the draft LEB SP need to be revised and re-developed with appropriate sub-objectives that address in a more specific manner the relevant threats (described in part 5), including:

- total grazing pressure,
- Disturbance of water features,
- Invasive species,
- Protection of threatened species, and
- climate change - in particular, potential adaptation strategies

In addition, Goal 1 should be supported by an additional objective aimed at establishing a cross-jurisdictional process for identifying and proclaiming additional areas within the LEB for higher levels of conservation status, for example as part of the National Reserves System (including additional indigenous protected areas and wilderness areas). This process should also explore the potential for a fresh initiative by LEB jurisdictions to jointly nominate the LEB for World Heritage listing, on account of its globally unique and outstanding natural and cultural values.

Finally, in response to the identified high risk arising from the chronic lack of data, information and certainty, Goal 1 should also be supported by another objective that reflects a firm commitment by LEB jurisdictions to adequately resource and effectively manage the Monitoring and Evaluation (MERI) framework that is currently under development.

(ii) Goals 2 and 3 - Celebrated Aboriginal culture and knowledge; an informed, engaged and resilient community

The objectives in the draft LEBSP under each of these goals are a matter for Aboriginal people, but in each instance, they require elaboration in terms of how they are to be pursued. This would be best done through the provision of more detailed sub-objectives and related, measurable outcomes.

(iii) Goal 4 - A diverse and adaptable economy

As with Goal 1, the objectives for Goal 4 are lacking in substance and accuracy and require considerable revision and elaboration. No economic data is provided as evidence to support assertions about the Basin's economy, the description of which seems more akin to a description of existing rural land uses and risks reifying these. For example, the major

contributions to Central Australia's (NT) economy are "public administration and safety", and "healthcare and special assistance"⁴.

There is no attempt within this Goal to address the future viability of existing economic activities within the Basin in the face of climate change. There is also only a vague proposal to "promote" the Basin as a unique tourist destination, provided this does not impact on environmental and cultural values.

More specific objectives are needed under Goal 4 to address existing and future economic, land-use activities, in particular:

- New oil and gas development,
- Pastoralism,
- Sustainable tourism,
- Mining and,
- Irrigated agriculture

With respect to future oil and gas development (both conventional and unconventional), the final LEB SP should provide that these activities are prohibited in the ecologically sensitive areas of the LEB - in particular its floodplains, rivers, wetlands and groundwater.

The Lake Eyre Basin Community Advisory Committee (LEB CAC), in its 2020 discussion paper on oil and gas activities in the LEB, adopted this recommendation and also called for an "independent review of the existing regulatory regime for oil and gas activities within the Basin". The final LEB SP should provide for such a review to be undertaken as soon as possible.

4. Conclusions

As it is currently written, the draft LEB SP fails to address the key threats to the ecological, hydrological and cultural values of the LEB. As a result, the draft LEB SP requires substantial revision and redevelopment, which should be undertaken through an open, consultative process that enables community and stakeholder input to the re-designed plan, instead of the process that has been utilised to prepare the current draft LEBSPP that was largely conducted behind closed doors by government officers.

It is also highly desirable that the current inadequate governance arrangements for the LEB are reformed prior to the adoption of the LEB SP, in particular by establishing a successor body to the now defunct Ministerial Forum.

Finally, there should also be a much stronger connection made in the final LEB SP to the GAB Strategic Management plan in relation to the significant threat to the GAB posed by current and potentially increased levels of groundwater extraction within the LEB.

⁴ RIEIL 2021 <https://www.rdant.com.au/resources-find-grants/regional-statistics/>

Please do not hesitate to contact any of the undersigned should you require further information or clarification regarding the matters raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely,



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