



News Release

Friday, 2 May, 2008



Government
of South Australia

Senator the Hon Penny Wong

Minister for Climate Change and Water
Chair, Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council

Hon Karlene Maywald MP

Minister for the River Murray
Minister for Water Security

PUMPING TO START IN LOWER MURRAY LAKES

Pumping of water from Lake Alexandrina in the lower River Murray will start today in the first phase of work to reduce the risk of acidification and environmental damage at Lake Albert.

The Minister for Climate Change and Water and Chair of the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council, Senator Penny Wong, and the South Australian Minister for the River Murray, Karlene Maywald, said the pumping would be undertaken by South Australian Government agencies for the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC).

The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council agreed to provide \$6 million at its meeting in March for emergency measures to address the critical situation in the Lower Lakes. The funds will be used to pump water from Lake Alexandrina to maintain Lake Albert at its current level and prevent further exposure of sulfidic sediments on the bed of Lake Albert.

“The Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert wetlands are among our best-known wetland systems and an icon site under The Living Murray initiative. Their importance is recognised internationally,” Senator Wong said.

“However, declining water availability has led to a decline in the site’s health.

“At Lake Albert, the situation today is serious. The extremely low water levels mean that there is a real risk of irreversible damage from exposure of acid sulfate soils.”

Acid sulfate soils contain sulfuric acid or have the potential to form sulfuric acid when exposed to oxygen in the air – for example when a lake bed usually covered by water is exposed. This can lead to a decline in water quality, with the potential to harm wildlife and threaten public health.

Minister Maywald said the South Australian Government was extremely concerned about the long-term damage that has already occurred in the Lower Lakes as a result of over-allocation and the current extreme drought.

“The Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth is an internationally recognised Ramsar-listed site and is part of two key agreements regarding environmental conditions for migratory birds. It is a very valuable site for the Murray-Darling Basin,” Minister Maywald said.

“The Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council has recognised that the crisis facing the Lower Lakes is a national issue and that all jurisdictions in the Basin must be part of the solution.

“The Lake Albert pumping project is a temporary measure that will prevent the lake from acidifying.

“The ultimate solution is more water flowing down to the end of the system to improve the health of the Lakes and Coorong.”

The additional water provided from Lake Alexandrina is expected have a minimal impact on that lake but is expected to safeguard Lake Albert until later this year.

Extensive monitoring will be undertaken to evaluate the effects of the pumping on Lake Albert. In coming days, a silt plume may be visible in the channel connecting Lake Albert and Lake Alexandrina due to the large volume of water being transferred.

The MDBC will provide options for the medium- to long-term management of the Lower Lakes to the Ministerial Council at its October 2008 meeting.

MDBC will also provide an interim report to the Ministerial Council in May on the status of the Lower Lakes and other significant wetlands in the Basin.