Murray–Darling Basin Economic Development Program Round 2

General feedback for applicants

Summary

Interest in the second round of the Murray–Darling Basin Economic Development Program (the program) was high, and this resulted in a highly competitive round and the full allocation of program funding.

Following eligibility and compliance screens and assessment of eligible and compliant applications, 27 organisations were selected to deliver 32 projects under the program. The selected projects propose diverse activities to promote economic activity and enhance community resilience to manage current and future economic challenges and changes across 29 of the 31 eligible communities. The projects cover various sectors including aged care, hospitality, tourism, capacity building and leadership, revitalisation and Indigenous cultural preservation.

A list of the 32 successful projects can be found on the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment website.

The selected applicants provided well-written responses to all the assessment criteria. The proposed activities were eligible under the program and clearly demonstrated how they would contribute to the program outcomes and represent value with relevant money as outlined in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

This document provides feedback to applicants on how applications could have been strengthened. Unsuccessful applicants are encouraged to consider how this feedback applies to their application and, should they wish to apply for any grant funding in the future, are also encouraged to use this information to maximise their chances of gaining funding in other programs.

Program overview

The Murray–Darling Basin Economic Development Program was announced by the then Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources on 7 May 2018, as part of the Basin Plan Commitments Package, to support those communities identified as impacted by water recovery under the Murray–Darling Basin Plan (the Basin Plan).

The first round of the program identified 15 Basin communities as 'most impacted' by water recovery activities under the Basin Plan (as defined by Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) research) and therefore eligible for funding.

The second round identified 31 communities as eligible for funding, including those:

- moderately impacted by Basin Plan water recovery activities as identified through MDBA research

- expected to experience some Basin Plan impacts due to the proposed acquisition of water entitlements, including A Class licences, in the lower Darling and Barwon-Darling as part of the Australian Government's response to the Independent assessment of the 2018-19 fish deaths in the lower Darling Final Report

- identified through 2019 election commitments.

The communities eligible for funding under Round 1 of the program were not eligible for funding under Round 2.

The 31 communities identified by the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE, the department) as eligible for the program in Round 2 are:

Queensland / New South Wales		
Mungindi		
New South Wales		
Berrigan-Finley	Hay	Walgett
Brewarrina	Menindee	Wee Waa
Bourke	Moree	Wentworth
Coomealla	Narromine	West Berriquin
Deniboota	Trangie	Wilcannia
Denimein		
New South Wales / Victoria		
Cullulleraine	Kerang-Cohuna	Swan Hill
Victoria		
Cobram	Mildura	Shepparton Irrigation Area
Kyabram-Tatura	Pyramid Hill-Boort	
South Australia		
Blanchetown	Morgan	Tailem Bend
Mannum	Murray Bridge	Waikerie

The objective of the program is to assist eligible communities to undertake economic development projects to respond to the impact of water recovery activities under the Basin Plan. The outputs of
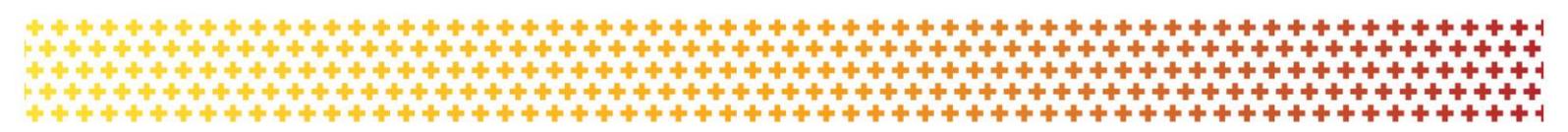
the program are the number of jobs created as a result of the economic development projects and the number of projects supporting activities continuing after the end of the projects.

The intended outcomes of the program are to:

- increase the capacity of communities to diversify and strengthen local economies

- enhance the resilience of communities to manage current and future economic challenges and changes, and

- increase opportunities for employment within communities.

The program is administered by the Department of Social Services' Community Grants Hub (the Hub), on behalf of DAWE under a Whole of Australian Government initiative to streamline grant processes across agencies.

Selection process

Projects were selected through an open competitive process.

The submitted applications were screened for initial eligibility and compliance against the requirements outlined in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines, and those applications passed were provided to the Selection Advisory Panel (the panel) for assessment against the three selection criteria:

Criterion 1 – Economic benefits (weighting of 40%)

Criterion 2 – Community support and benefit (weighting of 30%)

Criterion 3 – Organisational capability (weighting of 30%).

The panel comprised a Chair from DAWE, another member from the department and two members from the MDBA. The panel assessed the eligible and complaint applications, making final selections based on the strength of the applicants' responses to the assessment criteria, and their demonstrated ability to meet the requirements of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

The process of the panel involved a number of phases to obtain an agreed order of merit for applications with a balance of projects across the 31 identified communities, noting a notional allocation of around $450,000 (GST exclusive) of funding to each community.

To do this, the panel considered the application on its merits based on:

- how well it meets the criteria
- how it compares to other applications, and
- whether it provides value with relevant money.
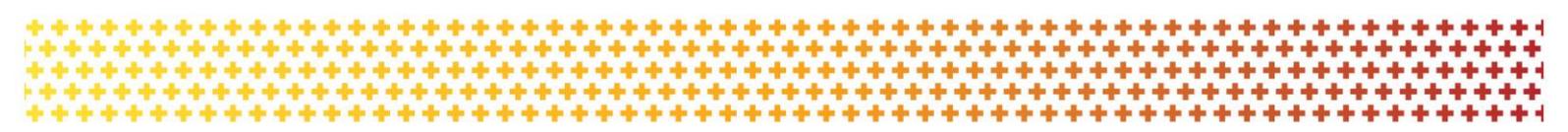
When assessing the extent to which the application represents value with relevant money, the selection advisory panel had regard to:

- the overall objective/s to be achieved in providing the grant

- the relative value of the grant sought

- the extent to which the geographic location of the application matches identified communities

- the extent to which the evidence in the application demonstrates it will contribute to meeting the program outcomes/objectives

- how the grant activities will target economic development in the identified communities, and

- the distribution of projects across the 31 eligible communities.

The phases of ranking projects were as follows:

- Phase 1: ranking of all eligible applications into an order of merit.

- Phase 2: assigning the highest ranked projects equal to or under $450,000 (GST exclusive) in the order of merit to each identified community until the notional allocation of $450,000 (GST exclusive) is reached for each community.

- Phase 3: assigning remaining funding available after phase 2 to the highest ranked projects according to the order of merit, until available program funding has been exhausted and all notional allocations have been met.

The decision to award grant funding to projects was made by the Hon. Keith Pitt MP, Minister for Resources, Water and Northern Australia based on the recommendations of the panel.

General feedback for applicants

Details about what made a strong response to each assessment criterion is provided in the Criteria specific feedback section below.

Successful applicants proposed activities which were eligible, appropriate and considered effective for achieving the program objectives. They demonstrated their suitability for public funding, value with relevant money and met the requirements outlined in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines. Successful applications included strong responses to all assessment criteria.

The feedback is based on the information provided by the panel and assessment team during the funding round.

Writing and providing details

Applications needed to clearly and concisely address the selection criteria. It was difficult to assess poorly written and verbose applications. The proper and discerning use of sub-headings and dot points in some applications assisted in improving their readability.
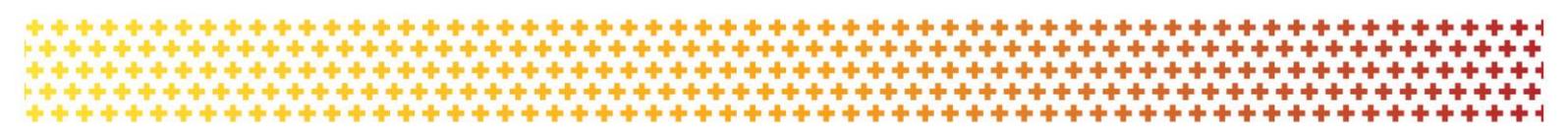
A number of applicants did not effectively utilise the word limits in their applications, providing either too little detail on the proposed project or too little relevant detail. Low scoring applications often lacked sufficient relevant detail to describe how the grant activity would meet the assessment criteria and therefore the objectives and outcomes of the program. Applications which provided limited or no details about how project activities would deliver on program outcomes, outputs and objectives generally did not score well. Higher scoring applications clearly articulated exactly how well the grant activity would meet the assessment criteria and why this method of achieving program objectives and outcomes was better than others.

Contribution towards program outcomes and demonstration of community benefit

These Australian Government grants are funded by public money and suitable projects were selected on the basis they will deliver economic benefits across the eligible Basin communities.

Applications needed to clearly demonstrate the project would:

- deliver the program objective of helping eligible communities undertake economic development projects to respond to the impact of water recovery activities under the Basin Plan. The projects needed to assist with:
  - increasing the capacity of communities to diversify and strengthen local economies
  - enhancing the resilience of communities to manage current and future economic challenges and changes
  - increasing opportunities for employment within communities
- deliver the program outputs, especially through the number of jobs created because of the economic development project and the activities continuing after the end of the project.

Low scoring applications often lacked sufficient relevant detail and evidence to describe project outcomes and activities and how the project will directly contribute towards the program outcomes, deliver community benefits and provide value with relevant money. Applications, which provided limited details about project activities generally, did not score well. Higher scoring applications more clearly articulated the project activities and what they would deliver, making stronger arguments, backed with some evidence, for the proposition they put forward.

In general, many applications could have more clearly articulated how their project would contribute to program outcomes and provided more and better information on the numbers of jobs to be created. Generally speaking, applications made reasonable arguments for the ongoing economic development activities that would be created by projects, although here too, there was room for some improvement.

In particular, in order to improve a project's relevance with the program should there be any future rounds, applicants should consider:

- checking the Grant Opportunity Guidelines to ensure the proposed project is a good fit for the program
- ensuring the application clearly demonstrates how the proposed project meets the program's outcomes and linking project activities to those outcomes

- demonstrating the reasons this project is the best possible use of taxpayer's funds to deliver benefits to the identified community/ies.

Capacity to deliver

Low scoring applications commonly did not strongly demonstrate the applicants had the capacity to successfully deliver the project. It was important to:

- demonstrate an applicant's ability to deliver projects of the nature, size and complexity outlined in their proposal

- ensure appropriate governance structures are in place

- ensure the applicant knew what good governance looked like and could realise that through its project

- ensure the project was adequately resourced and explain how those delivering the project were well qualified and suitable to do so

- clearly describe the roles and responsibilities of different organisations involved in the project (including project partners or co-contributors).

Ineligible activities and budget items

Several applications included ineligible budget items or activities, including activities which were the responsibility of other Government agencies. A full list of ineligible items and activities can be found at section 5.4 of the Grant Opportunity Guidelines. In particular, there were unsuccessful applications that included:

- research and development projects

- activities which were the primary responsibility of local government authorities

- projects that benefitted only private individuals/enterprises.

Criteria specific feedback

Criterion 1 – Economic benefits

In responding to this criterion, applicants were to describe the project in detail, identify which community it related to, specify the location of the activities, and describe how it will deliver economic benefits that address the impacts of water recovery on the community. Economic benefits may include how the project will:

- diversify and strengthen an identified community's economy

- enhance resilience of the community to manage current and future economic challenges and changes, and

- increase opportunities within the community for employment.

Quality application responses:	Areas for improvement:
- identified an eligible community or communities - defined the project well, including its scope - outlined how the project would deliver outcomes sought by the Murray–Darling Basin Economic Development Program Round 2, specifically: - detailing how the project will contribute to economic development and how this will deliver benefits to the broader community - listing the activities and how these will deliver the program's outcomes - articulating how the activity will enhance an existing industry, generate opportunities for a new industry, link with and / or complement other activities in the region - describing how the activities would be conducted to deliver the outcomes - outlining the employment opportunities to be created / what impacts would be realised in the community - stated additional benefits - articulated innovative and original projects - demonstrated projects that were adapting to changing circumstances and providing the community with options for its future - provided solid examples of diversification and / or strengthening of the local economy through the project - illustrated how the community would be made more resilient.	Generally, applicants could have strengthened their responses to Criterion 1 by providing: - further detail about how the proposed activity delivers clear achievements against the program outcomes - diversifies and/or strengthens a community's economy, enhances a community's resilience and increases employment opportunities - more detailed information about how the activity delivers benefits to the broader community - further details about the type of the activities, project methodology and how the project will deliver the program's intended outcomes (the attachment 'project proposal' was, in part, intended for applicants to provide sufficient level of detail they felt could not be provided in the word-limited application form).

Criterion 2 – Community support and benefit

In responding to this criterion, applicants were to describe how the project will provide support for and benefit to the community, as opposed to only individuals or enterprises within the community. The community must also support projects. These two elements may be evidenced by:

- a description of the linkages to relevant local economic development strategies, including the plans, priorities or challenges outlined in any relevant local, state or Australian Government policies or other documentation that demonstrate the project is a strategic priority

- an analysis of the public benefit

- recent written support from key stakeholders for the project, including but not limited to relevant local governments, community stakeholders and Indigenous communities (up to five written letters of support could be included).

Quality application responses:	Areas for improvement
- explicitly linked to strategies relevant to the community - considered the community needs and the benefits to a wide range of community and interest groups outside of the immediate project personnel and / or organisations - made the connection on how the project would support or address relevant challenges or priorities in relevant local economic development strategies - identified and articulated the benefit of the project to the community, what benefit the project was to deliver and how this would be realised - provided evidence of support from relevant stakeholders and community members, including from Indigenous communities - provided letters of support from a broad cross-section of the community or noted that these letters (and whom they would be from) were available upon request.	Generally, applicants could have strengthened their responses to Criterion 2 by: - demonstrating the project is a priority for the community - providing clear evidence the project supports and brings benefits to the community broadly - evidencing support from a broad cross-section of the community, not only those organisations directly involved in the project - not attaching form letters where the text has been provided by the applicant for signing by multiple supporters of the project - providing a wider cross section of community letters of support than the local members of Parliament, including from Indigenous groups and grass roots organisations.

Criterion 3 – Organisational capability

In responding to this criterion, applicants were to describe how they will manage and deliver the project, including their financial control systems and project management arrangements. Applicants were to include:

- a detailed itemised budget, including contingency allowances, in the template provided

- details of your proposed governance arrangements and how you will manage the project

- a summary of your plan to deliver the project, in the form of a detailed project plan, including subcontracting arrangements

- a description of the experience of the personnel who will be delivering and managing the project/s.

Quality application responses:	Areas for improvement
- included a sufficiently detailed budget – identified project costs to a level appropriate to the size and scope of the project – identified financial contributions – amount and to which items – from other organisations - outlined the governance arrangements of the project – demonstrated the applicant had adequate relevant experience to deliver the proposed project – outlined the organisation's history in administering projects of the size and type proposed – ensured partner organisations' activities were well coordinated – demonstrated the applicant was adequately equipped to deliver a project of the complexity proposed and achieve a positive outcome - evidenced the applicant had relevant processes in place to ensure the project – would be well managed – timelines would be met – would be staffed with suitably skilled personnel – finances would be monitored accurately – would be reported properly	Generally, applicants could have strengthened their responses to Criterion 3 by: - including a budget with sufficient number and detailed line items of requested funding that was sourced from industry information – many applications required more detailed budgets - providing detailed information and evidence that the applicant had the required technical knowledge, skills and systems in place to be able to deliver the proposed project and achieve a positive outcome - providing detailed information on how the project would be managed and governance arrangements to manage, coordinate and implement project activities - explaining capacity constraints where the same personnel were identified to be involved in multiple projects - providing evidence they can work collaboratively with partners in this project and manage sub-contracting arrangements to successful conclusions.

Quality application responses:	Areas for improvement

• provided details on any proposed sub-contracting arrangements and the skills and expertise to be brought in to deliver the project
 	
  – detailed the way in which relevant partnerships would operate both administratively and practically, and explained the role of each organisation partner and the activities they would be responsible for
  – evidenced the applicants' ability to work collaboratively with partner organisations in their project
 	
• detailed the applicant had personnel with the required technical knowledge and skills to be able to deliver the proposed project
 	
  – outlined their expertise or access to the relevant expertise required to deliver the project.	

Attachments

Applicants were to attach the following documentation to the application for it to be considered compliant and for it to proceed to assessment:

- a project proposal

- a project budget

- copies of written support or an indication that this would be provided on request.

Quality application responses:	Areas for improvement

• attached a project proposal that:
 	
  – provided additional information to complement that provided in the application form (e.g. relating to governance arrangements, and against the selection criteria)
  – outlined a suitable plan for the project including activities, tasks, deliverables, key milestones and timeframes
  – demonstrated an understanding and consideration of risks associated with delivering the grant activities, and
	Generally, applicants could have strengthened their responses by:
	
	• providing detailed evidence the proposed project would identify and engage with relevant stakeholders and incorporate and provide benefit to a wide range of community and interest groups outside of the immediate project personnel and/or organisations

Quality application responses:	Areas for improvement

stipulated the processes to be put in place to ensure management and mitigation of identified risks
 	
• attached a project budget
   – refer to specific feedback for Criterion 3 – Organisation capability
 	
• included copies of written support
   – refer to specific feedback for Criterion 2 – Community support and benefit
	• avoiding cutting and pasting from the main application, and including more and better details on the project
	
	• explaining how the applicant will coordinate the interests, needs and valuable contributions of all stakeholders, including people from diverse or minority backgrounds
	
	• outlining the applicant identified and understood project risks and that processes were in place to manage and mitigate the identified risks.

Individual feedback

Individual feedback is available to applicants by contacting the Community Grants Hub (the Hub) (phone:1800 020 283 or email: support@communitygrants.gov.au) within **40 business days** of having received the outcome notification letter. Please include in the request your legal entity name, application ID and the project activity title. The Hub will endeavour to respond to your request within 30 business days from the date of the request for feedback.