



Baseline evaluation of the Marine Estate Management Strategy

Findings and recommendations from the first evaluation (Strategy evaluation report)

A final report prepared for the Department of Regional NSW - Department of Primary Industries

3 September 2021

About Aither

Aither's purpose is to help governments and businesses make better decisions about globally significant issues. Natural systems are increasingly strained and under threat, creating challenges in water, infrastructure, cities, agriculture and the environment. The future is uncertain, and the stakes are high.

We combine economics, policy and strategy to help decision-makers to clarify their objectives, address the right problems and opportunities, and continuously improve.

We offer services across four key sectors:

- Water markets
- Water policy and management
- Water utilities and infrastructure
- Resilience and adaptation.

Aither assisted the Department of Primary Industries and MEMA agencies to collaboratively develop the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework in 2019. Aside from preparing the Framework, Aither has not been involved in delivery of the MEMS. As such, Aither was able to provide an independent evaluation, with no real or perceived conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

Acronym	Meaning
DPIE	Department of Planning, Industry and Environment
DPIE Crown Lands	Department of Planning, Industry and Environment – Crown Lands
DPIE Water	Department of Planning, Industry and Environment - Water
DPIF	Department of Primary Industries Fisheries
DPIE – EES / EES	Department of Planning, Industry and Environment - Environment, Energy and Science
DPIE – P	Department of Planning, Industry and Environment – Planning and Assessment
EPA	Environment Protection Authority
EWG	Evaluation Working Group
IWG	Interagency Working Group
KEQ	Key Evaluation Question
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LI	Leading Indicator
MASC	Marine estate Agency Steering Committee
MEEKP	Marine Estate Expert Knowledge Panel
MEMA	Marine Estate Management Authority
MEMS	Marine Estate Management Strategy
MEMS staff	Staff responsible for governance and/or delivery of the Marine Estate Management Strategy
MER	Monitoring, evaluation and reporting
Monitoring and Evaluation Framework	Integrated monitoring and evaluation framework for the Marine Integrated Monitoring Program
MIMP	Marine Integrated Monitoring Program
MIMP SC	Marine Integrated Monitoring Program Steering Committee
MIMP staff	Staff responsible for governance and/or delivery of the Marine Integrated Monitoring Program
NRAR	Natural Resource Access Regulator
NSW	New South Wales
TARA	Threat and Risk Assessment
TfNSW	Transport for NSW
TWG	Technical Working Group

Executive Summary

Overall findings

Overall, this baseline / formative evaluation of the Marine Estate Management Strategy (MEMS) found the first two years of implementation (Stage 1, 2018 – 2020) have:

- built strong foundations for future success,
- achieved change against all short-term outcomes, and
- set a trajectory for achieving intermediate and long-term outcomes.

Staff responsible for the delivery of the MEMS have been required to adapt the program in response to challenges beyond their control. These included bushfires, floods, COVID-19, several machinery of government changes; extended approvals processes; reduced funding; and funding uncertainty. At times, adapting to these challenges has required the rescoping of projects and caused project delays. Despite these challenges, important and significant projects have been delivered or substantially progressed across most initiatives.

There has been at least some achievement against all short-term outcomes set out in the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. There is also evidence of early progress against a range of intermediate outcomes. This suggests that the MEMS is on track to continue to deliver outcomes in the future.

Important management and delivery processes have been established in Stage 1 and, with some refinements, will continue to support efficient delivery of the MEMS. These include governance arrangements, collaboration and partnership arrangements, project management and reporting processes, and external communication. In particular, coordination and collaboration have improved significantly during Stage 1 and have been important enablers of successful implementation. This is an early indication that the intent of the MEMS – for holistic and integrated management of the marine estate – is working.

The Marine Estate Management Strategy (MEMS), released in 2018, represents a new integrated, holistic and collaborative approach to managing the New South Wales (NSW) marine estate. The MEMS focuses on addressing priority threats and risks to the marine estate that require long-term management. Overall, it aims to achieve the Marine Estate Management Agency's (MEMA) vision for *a healthy coast and sea, managed for the greatest well-being of the community, now and into the future*.

This report provides findings and recommendations from the formative / baseline evaluation of the MEMS. The evaluation is intended to:

- identify achievement against short-term outcomes (0-2 years) set out in the 2019 [integrated monitoring and evaluation framework](#) (the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework)
- present baseline information against which to measure future performance
- identify insights for continuous improvement
- support internal transparency and accountability.

The evaluation drew on quantitative and qualitative information from monitoring against outcome indicators, interviews, administrative data, MEMS strategic documents, MEMS reporting documents and processes, and MEMA reports. All information was provided by the MEMA agencies. The evaluation was conducted from December 2020 to June 2021, and considered Stage 1 of MEMS implementation (2018-2020) and the first six months of Stage 2 (July-December 2020).

The Marine Estate Management Strategy is critical for delivering and communicating integrated outcomes for the marine estate, communities and industries

The MEMS is still critical for advancing coordinated, integrated and evidence-based management, and to address the ongoing priority threats and stressors to the marine estate. The MEMS represents a new integrated, holistic and collaborative approach to managing the marine estate. It is a legislated, evidence-based strategy with strong ownership and participation from multiple key agencies. It provides agencies with a clear vision and priorities for managing the marine estate. It does so by setting a framework for working efficiently together across different agencies. There is strong community awareness and support for the MEMS, and there are associated expectations that the MEMS will deliver against its long-term outcomes and vision. Without the coordinated and integrated management enabled by the MEMS, the multiple agencies responsible for the marine estate are unlikely to be able to enhance support for marine estate management, balance trade-offs in use, and deliver benefits for all stakeholders.

The MEMS focuses on addressing threats and risks to the marine estate that are complex and require long-term management. The priority threats and competing uses of the marine estate, identified in the 2017 state-wide [Threat and Risk Assessment](#) (TARA), are still present. While the nature of and understanding of some of these threats have changed since 2017, the need for coordinated and ongoing management has not.

Delivery of the MEMS has adapted to a range of external challenges, including bushfires, floods, the COVID-19 pandemic and machinery of government changes

Delivery of the MEMS has been affected by unanticipated, ongoing challenges outside of the control of the MEMS agencies. Despite these challenges, MEMS staff adapted their delivery approaches and have made substantial progress in delivering actions. The challenges faced by MEMS include the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2019-20 NSW bushfires and subsequent floods, and machinery of government changes, with many of these events occurring on an unprecedented scale. Each event has affected the marine estate policy and management environment, with practical implications for delivery.

Several coastal catchments were affected by the 2019-20 bushfires and subsequent floods, with environmental impacts for the marine estate. The emergency response caused disruptions for staff across MEMS agencies.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic affected on-ground and face-to-face activities planned for 2020, including field-based research and stakeholder engagement. This delayed multiple projects and resulted in some projects being re-scoped. It also contributed to delays to conducting surveys through the MIMP, which were intended to provide baseline data to inform this evaluation.

There have been several changes to machinery of government in NSW since 2018, with multiple MEMS delivery teams being moved between departments. As a result, there were changes to staff positions and inter-agency working arrangements, and delays to recruiting staff. The changes also

created periods of adjustment and confusion for the affected agencies, partner agencies and other stakeholders.

There has been substantial progress in delivering actions, despite these challenges. There have also been unexpected positive outcomes from adapting to these changes. This includes rapid expansion of the water quality monitoring network to monitor bushfire impacts; extending the reach, efficiency and effectiveness of engagement and education activities through virtual methods; and improved collaboration and efficiency between agencies as some were brought together within a shared department cluster.

Collaboration, delivery processes and governance arrangements are robust, with opportunities to further strengthen

Governance arrangements, and delivery and program management processes have been established. These foundations have enabled improved coordination and collaboration among government agencies, and with stakeholder and community groups. Some opportunities for improvement have become evident in the last two years. Reviewing and refining some specific delivery processes is required to improve the effectiveness and focus of MEMS implementation.

Coordination and collaboration have improved significantly over recent years and has been an important enabler of successful program implementation. There were reports of strong engagement and collaboration both between and within MEMS agencies, with external stakeholders, and beyond the MEMS program. The MEMS has helped establish relationships and build awareness between agencies. It has also enabled the sharing of resources, knowledge and information, and created a shared sense of ownership for delivery of the MEMS. Staff have reported that collaboration on MEMS projects has also helped foster relationships with other agencies and external stakeholders, with benefits that extend beyond their MEMS work. This is an early indication the MEMS is delivering upon its core intent.

There are also areas for improvement related to processes and governance arrangements. These include ensuring that; governance, approvals, collaboration and communication protocols remain fit-for-purpose as implementation progresses; stakeholder communication is coordinated between agencies; and program management reporting is aligned with staff and stakeholder needs. Refining these processes will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of implementation and achievement of outcomes.

Approved Stage 1 projects were largely delivered on schedule, with some delays due to unexpected external challenges and funding uncertainty

Overall, implementation of the MEMS is progressing well. Staff adapted to the challenges outlined above to deliver projects and lay foundations for future success. Projects identified for Stage 1 were broadly completed in line with the approved scope. However, the scope was reduced for some actions and projects to accommodate reduced or uncertain funding and delays from approvals and unexpected events. In some areas, this is likely to affect the achievement of intermediate and long-term outcomes. Risks that are within the control of the MEMA agencies or NSW Government, such as delayed approvals and funding quantum and uncertainty, must be addressed to ensure the MEMS vision and long-term outcomes can be achieved.

Funding uncertainty is a significant barrier to effective MEMS delivery

Longer-term funding certainty is required to ensure effective delivery of the MEMS. Funding uncertainty and delayed approvals processes also compound the difficulty of responding to external events and risk. The MEMS is a long-term strategy with a range of projects that span multiple years and aim to achieve long-term outcomes. These actions and projects require long-term planning, longer-term funding certainty, and timely approvals processes to be implemented effectively. However, only short-term funding has been approved for the MEMS. Some initiatives also received significantly less funding than was required to undertake projects intended for Stage 1. As a result, some projects could not be commenced in Stage 1.

One- or two-year funding cycles create delivery inefficiencies. Staff spend a significant amount of time applying for funding on a frequent basis and are limited in their ability to undertake long-term planning and implementation. Short funding cycles make it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff, and risks failure to meet stakeholder expectations regarding longer-term achievements. It also makes it difficult to adapt to external threats and challenges.

Achievement has been observed against all short-term outcomes

There has been at least some achievement against all MEMS short-term outcomes, as set out in the 2019 [Marine Integrated Monitoring Program \(MIMP\) Monitoring and Evaluation Framework](#). Short-term outcomes had expected timeframes of 0-2 years. Therefore, there was expected to be observable change against short-term outcomes at the end of 2020. Information from indicator results, interviews, administrative data, MEMS strategic documents, MEMS reporting documents and processes, and MEMA reports collectively indicate that there has been at least some achievement against all short-term outcomes. Intermediate outcomes have expected timeframes of 2-5 years; however, early progress has been identified for a range of intermediate outcomes. This is an indication that MEMS implementation is on track to achieving further outcomes in the future.

Staff are continuing to establish baseline data against a range of indicators, which will better support the measurement of change against outcomes in the future. There have been impediments to collecting results against indicators due to:

- delays to administering surveys due to the COVID-19 pandemic, slow approvals processes and funding constraints. Multiple surveys were developed in Stage 1, but delays to final approvals meant that surveys could not be conducted in time for the results to inform this evaluation.
- delayed and lack of funding, and delays to appointing staff, for implementing the MIMP.
- a lack of clarity among some staff, particularly those new to the MEMS, regarding the role of the MIMP and initiative-based roles and responsibilities for monitoring outcomes.
- a focus on delivering and reporting on actions and projects, with less emphasis on monitoring outcomes.

Staff have also identified outcomes and indicators to review to improve appropriateness for the MEMS intent and scope, and to improve practicality for future monitoring. Data was not collected for most indicators that were identified for refinement. Refinements to outcomes and indicators should help to improve data availability in the future.

Future implementation

The projects undertaken in the last two years have supported some achievement against all short-term outcomes and laid the groundwork for further results in the future. These projects are a first step. Ongoing management, supported by greater funding certainty, is required to ensure that investment to date is not wasted. It is only through continued implementation of the MEMS that the NSW Government can holistically manage the marine estate and support important social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits for NSW communities and industries.

The recommendations and findings from this first evaluation aim to support continued improvement in delivery of the MEMS. The implementation of the recommendations will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of delivery, and better position the MEMS to achieve intermediate and long-term outcomes for the marine estate and NSW community. As noted in the final recommendation, the Marine estate Agency Steering Committee (MASC) and the Marine Integrated Monitoring Program Steering Committee (MIMP SC) should confirm responsibilities and timeframes for addressing accepted recommendations.

Recommendations

Context / basis

Recommendation 1

The scheduled five-year review of the TARA should consider new evidence that has emerged since 2017. This includes insights and evidence relating to bushfires, timeframes for climate change risks, and other evidence arising from new or ongoing research, monitoring, cultural knowledge or other formal documentation relating to the marine estate. Future MEMS initiatives, outcomes, management actions and projects should reflect any revised priority threats and risks.

Recommendation 2

NSW Government should provide longer-term funding for delivery of the MEMS program. This will allow more efficient planning and implementation, and reduce risks to achievement of intermediate and long-term outcomes for the marine estate environment and the communities and industries it benefits.

Process and delivery

Recommendation 3

Processes for decision-making, approvals and communication should be reviewed and refined. Decision-making and approvals processes must be made clear; and decisions communicated to staff in a transparent and timely manner. To ensure that collaborative processes add value to the project or outcome, input should only be sought from those with relevant expertise or accountabilities.

Recommendation 4

Program management reporting requirements and frequency should be reviewed to ensure reporting is fit-for-purpose for staff and decision-makers. MEMS governance groups and decision-makers should communicate their responses for addressing reported risks, issues or recommendations to initiative staff. External reporting of content captured through program management reporting should also be reviewed to ensure the information and frequency is fit-for-purpose for stakeholders.

Recommendation 5

Enhance centralised communications and engagement by:

- Ensuring MEMS staff are aware of the existing centralised communications and engagement strategy, and their responsibilities for undertaking coordinated and consistent engagement, where appropriate.
- Providing external audiences with clear and simple summaries of the MEMS scope and MEMS agencies roles and responsibilities, to assist in managing stakeholder expectations. This should include clarifying interfaces with other related legislation and agencies.
- Providing consistent messaging on shared and common topics, accompanied by guidance for staff to develop initiative-specific messages and communication where required (including co-branded communications, where appropriate).

Recommendation 6

Clearly communicate the process and requirements for adaptively managing actions and projects, where needed, to MEMS staff.

Outcomes, and outcome monitoring and reporting

Recommendation 7

Initiative leads, with input from MIMP staff, should review specific outcomes and indicators identified through this evaluation to improve their appropriateness and practicality. Refinements must be consistent with the definitions of outcomes and indicators set out in the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. Once refinements to outcomes and indicators have been agreed, initiative leads must complete indicator specifications, where required, to guide data collection.

Recommendation 8

Initiative leads and MIMP staff, with input from MASC and MIMP Steering Committee, should review, agree and clearly communicate roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for outcomes and monitoring. In doing so:

- Roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for outcomes, indicators and data collection should be assigned to specific individual roles, in alignment with existing governance and delivery roles across the MEMS and MIMP. Roles and responsibilities for indicators and data collection will be assigned to initiative leads or delegates.
- Accountabilities for achieving specific outcomes should be allocated to relevant senior executive roles within the MEMA agencies, reflecting alignment with existing areas of responsibility.

- Include timeframes for fulfilling responsibilities.

Recommendation 9

Initiative leads should budget for MIMP implementation with respect to their initiative. MASC and MIMP SC should ensure funding and resources are allocated to effectively implement the MIMP.

Recommendation 10

Initiative leads should identify any short-term outcomes that require ongoing effort to maintain achievements to date, or where there is a desire for further improvement. Initiative and project leads should continue to consider these outcomes in planning and delivery during Stage 2.

Recommendation 11

Initiative leads, with support from MIMP staff, should embed systems or processes within initiatives for collating data against outcomes, indicators and measures. This should reflect agreed roles and responsibilities and data collection frequencies identified in the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. Where possible, these should align with existing processes for collating and documenting initiative-level data and information.

Periodic reporting on outcomes and indicators should be embedded into existing initiative and program reporting processes, in line with the frequency of data collection in the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework.

Recommendation 12

Establish an approach for external reporting against outcomes and indicators. The approach should outline format, frequency and content requirements; be targeted to audience needs and interests; and drive accountability. The reporting frequency may be longer than the data collection frequencies specified in the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework.

General

Recommendation 13

MASC and the MIMP SC should confirm responsibilities and set timeframes for executing accepted recommendations. They should also allocate responsibilities, to agencies and roles, where not identified in the recommendations.

A I T H E R