

Rivers Without Borders: Rethinking River Governance in a Changing World

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SYMPOSIUM SATELLITE EVENT #7
KEY MESSAGES



The International River Foundation

The International River Foundation (IRF) is the world's voice for rivers. For over twenty years, we have championed river resilience to create a legacy of healthy rivers that benefit ecosystems, communities and economies. Through the platform of people, ideas and impact, the IRF collaborates with global partners to help drive river restoration projects worldwide and accelerate action towards resilient rivers for future generations.

Symposium Satellite Event #7

Rivers connect us across borders, and governance must evolve to keep pace with a changing world. Rivers are the lifeblood of the landscapes, communities and economies they run through, but climate volatility, development pressure and hydrological unpredictability are testing governance systems built for calmer conditions.

This event, sponsored by AmaWaterways and Suntory, brought together the International Joint Commission (IJC), the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA), the

European Commission (EC) and University of Waterloo (UW) to ask how governance can evolve to strengthen cooperation, resilience, trust and shared stewardship across jurisdictions.

The three case studies and the synthesis and closing reflections showed how key governance institutions are evolving to meet today's river and water management challenges, and underscored the need for continual adaptation, vigilance and inclusion of all actors.

All Symposium Satellite Events will lead into programming at the 27th International River Symposium (IRS).

Hosted in partnership with Conservation Ontario, this international event will take place from 20 - 23 September 2027 in Toronto, Canada.

Click here to register your interest and be the first to hear about the latest IRS 2027 updates.

Reconnecting to rivers, and to each other, is how governance keeps up with a changing world

The clearest message from this Satellite Event is that no government, institution, sector, community or knowledge system can secure the future of a shared river alone. Adaptive institutions, trusted evidence, adequate investment, Indigenous leadership and cross-border collaboration all matter, but they depend on something more fundamental: our willingness to work together, build and sustain trust, and to take shared responsibility for the rivers that connect us.

Every speaker, in different ways, arrived at the same place: durable river governance depends less on any single treaty or technical fix than on humility, relationships and a willingness to keep adapting together across borders. A renewed sense of place and connection to rivers can change how we value and govern them - and as the closing message of the event put it, by fostering collaboration and pursuing innovative solutions together, we can revive our rivers and build a more resilient future for the planet and future generations.

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Philip Weller
Director, International
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Andrew McConville
Chief Executive, Murray-
Darling Basin Authority



Dr Glenn Benoy
Secretary – Canadian
Section, International Joint
Commission



Veronica Manfredi
Director of Zero Pollution,
Water Resilience and
Green Urban Transition,
DG Environment, European
Commission



Prof Dustin Garrick
University Research Chair
in Water and Development
Policy, University of
Waterloo



**Commissioner Susan Bell
Chiblow**
Canadian Commissioner,
International Joint
Commission

1. Climate pressures are outpacing existing river governance systems

Extreme floods, droughts and hydrological volatility - documented across the Danube, Rhine, Murray-Darling and elsewhere - are damaging rivers faster than institutions can adapt. Ms Veronica Manfredi cited droughts affecting 74% of Europe's population in 2026 alone, framing this as a structural, permanent pressure rather than a temporary anomaly.

2. Good governance must be able to learn, adapt and evolve

Static governance arrangements cannot keep pace with changing hydrology, worsening droughts and floods, and increasing demands on shared waters. Dr Glenn Benoy emphasised that transboundary cooperation must evolve as conditions change, while Andrew McConville described how the Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review is helping ensure that the Plan remains 'fit for the future' through adaptive, transparent and increasingly place-based management.

3. Cooperation, resilience, trust and shared stewardship are the four tests any governance model must meet

This was the explicit thought-leadership question set for the event, and every case study was measured against it. The IJC, MDBA and EC each represent a different real-world attempt to satisfy these same four criteria.

4. Strong, shared, science-based knowledge is the non-negotiable foundation of credible governance

Shared scientific knowledge, transparent decision-making and clear reporting help parties move beyond competing positions towards common understanding and practical solutions. The IJC, MDBA and EC all root their legitimacy in transparent, technical decision-making - from sustainable diversion limits to apportionment science.

5. Effective governance brings together multiple forms of knowledge

Managing a shared river is not simply a scientific, technical or administrative exercise; it requires knowledge from different disciplines, institutions, communities and lived experiences. Andrew McConville emphasised that basin management is strengthened when conventional science is combined with First Nations knowledge, local experience and community perspectives. Prof Dustin Garrick and Commissioner Chiblow added that science alone is insufficient without community and Indigenous knowledge alongside it.

6. Trust, diplomacy and institutional neutrality sustain cross-border cooperation over decades

The IJC's century-old design - equal funding, consensus decisions, and an oath of impartiality - was held up as the clearest example. Dr Benoy summarised the benefit as faster dispute resolution, reduced risk and lower costs. Built-in flexibility, paired with transparent reporting, allows rules to evolve without eroding public trust.

7. Indigenous inclusion is both a historic gap and a defining future priority

Commissioner Chiblow highlighted the depth of Indigenous Science and its long-term, place-based understanding of rivers, lakes and ecosystems. Mr McConville described parallel 2023 reforms in the Murray-Darling Basin. Each stressed real work remains to secure genuine decision-making power, not just consultation. Indigenous collaboration should not simply be added to existing governance arrangements; meaningful inclusion requires deliberate changes in relationships, structures and decision-making processes so that Indigenous Peoples are genuine partners in governing shared waters.

8. Valuing water means valuing rivers in all their dimensions

Water cannot be valued separately from the rivers, landscapes and communities that sustain it. Governance decisions must recognise the ecological, cultural, spiritual, social and livelihood values of rivers alongside their economic value, while respecting the many ways people understand, use and relate to them. They must also account for the interconnectedness of rivers, groundwater, urbanisation and water security; overlooking these relationships can lead to unintended consequences, deepen exclusion and leave vulnerable communities worse off.

9. Water and river resilience are economic, strategic and financial priorities, not just environmental

River governance must therefore be recognised not only as an environmental responsibility, but as a foundation for economic resilience, community wellbeing, water and food security, and long-term competitiveness. Ms Manfredi cited EC estimates of tens to hundreds of billions in economic risk from water instability and described blended public-private instruments like the €40 billion Water Resilience Investment Accelerator. Public money alone will never be enough. Adaptive institutions, including market mechanisms, let governance keep pace with change without losing stability.

10. Resilience requires ecosystem restoration, smarter water use and innovative investment

Ms Manfredi highlighted the importance of restoring wetlands, peatlands, free-flowing rivers, groundwater systems and water-retaining "sponge landscapes" to rebuild natural resilience. These measures must be supported by improved water efficiency and reuse, modern infrastructure, digital monitoring and blended public-private financing, including initiatives such as the European Water Resilience Investment Accelerator.

11. Strain on rivers is also an opportunity to strengthen governance, not just a threat to manage

Philip Weller framed climate and development pressures as a call to action: the same forces straining river systems are pushing institutions toward more transparent, inclusive and adaptive models than existed before. Across every case study, periods of crisis - droughts, disputes, exclusion - were the catalyst that ultimately produced stronger governance.

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