

# Best Practice Guidelines for Geological & Bioregional Assessment Basin User Panels

Principles for design and performance

Justine Lacey, Yuwan Malakar, Anthony Swirepik, Andrew Stacey & Rod Dann  
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# 1 Introduction and structure of this report

The role of gas exploration and development in Australia has been identified as critical for securing the nation's energy future. Gas is a critical input to Australia's national energy system in order to transition to a lower emissions future and ensure future reliability of the national electricity market (Australian Government, 2017b). In recognition of current demands on existing gas supplies in Australia, the Australian Government has announced a number of reforms to energy policy that seek to impose export controls when there is a shortfall in the domestic gas supply market. However, it is also recognised that facilitating the development of additional gas resources to meet Australia's current and future energy demands is required (Australian Government, 2017a). In further developing these onshore resources, it has been recognised that there is also a need to respond transparently to community interests and concerns about the potential social and environmental impacts of unconventional gas extraction (Australian Government, 2017a & 2017b).

In May 2017, the Australian Government announced the Geological and Bioregional Assessment (GBA) Program to be conducted in three onshore areas identified as prospective for shale and tight gas (Australian Government, 2018). The Program is a four year \$30.4 million initiative being undertaken by the Department of the Environment and Energy in partnership with CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology and Geoscience Australia. The Program will examine the potential environmental impacts of tight and shale gas development and will provide independent scientific advice to governments and regulators, landowners, communities, businesses and industries. To date the following regions have been selected for assessment:

- the Cooper Basin, which spans south-west Queensland and north-east South Australia;
- the Isa Superbasin, which covers parts of northern Queensland, extending east from the Northern Territory border; and
- the Beetaloo Sub-basin, which lies southeast of Katherine in the Northern Territory.

While the Program is centrally focused on providing transparent, scientific evidence to increase understanding of the potential environmental impacts of tight and shale gas development in Australia, the Program will also establish Basin User Panels in each of the three identified regions. The purpose of the User Panels is to understand the information needs and basin users in relation to tight and shale gas development and how the GBA Program can best respond to these needs. As each Panel will be comprised of a membership representing a range of key stakeholder interests in each region, the Panels will also function as a means to engage with key stakeholders and communities about their views and expectations of tight and shale gas development within their own regions. This provides key decision-makers with access to an understanding of the needs and expectations of stakeholders and communities that can be considered alongside the scientific assessments of the environmental impacts of tight and shale gas development.

The ***intended objectives of the User Panels*** within the GBA Program are to:

- provide user advice and guidance as assessments are developed for each of the regions selected;
- inform and develop assessments that address the questions and concerns of the users in each region;
- strengthen connections and understanding between the Program and communities across each region;
- build community confidence and trust in the Program design, science and objectives; and
- provide a forum to discuss assessment findings and identify linkages to other activities within each region.

The inclusion of a structured panel process in each of the three regions is a commitment by the Australian Government to respond transparently to how stakeholders and communities understand and think about the potential impacts of unconventional gas extraction (Australian Government, 2018). The Panels also provide a mechanism for local and expert knowledge about tight and shale gas development and its impacts to be shared openly among key stakeholders and communities, and to increase the exchange of knowledge between the Program and the communities within the selected regions.

The purpose of this report is to outline a series of best practice principles that underpin the design of the User Panels in each of the three regions. Following this introduction, this report will:

- provide a brief review of the literature on community and stakeholder engagement in the extractive industries;
- provide a justification for the inclusion and intended outcome of User Panels in the design of the GBA Program;
- identify the key design principles for effective User Panel design and implementation in the GBA Program;
- briefly outline the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the User Panels within the GBA Program.

## 2 Community & stakeholder engagement in the extractive industries: a brief literature review

The influence of community members and broader society in the development trajectories of unconventional gas development is subject to considerable attention (Randall, 2012; Walton et al., 2013; Lacey & Lamont, 2014; Colvin et al., 2015; Walton et al., 2015). In recent times, social resistance to the gas development in Australia (and around the world) has been articulated through the use of social media platforms, and popular culture mechanisms such as film, and ‘grassroots’ campaigns involving diverse communities of stakeholders (Moffat et al., 2017). As a result, community interests and concerns are increasingly playing a role in the way the gas industry operates and how governments regulate the industry to provide increased community confidence (Moffat et al., 2018a).

Within the broader portfolio of gas development and in line with current Australian energy priorities (Australian Government, 2017a & 2017b; Finkel et al., 2017; Australian Government, 2018), the potential of increasing onshore gas supply through the exploitation of tight and shale gas resources is under consideration. Increasingly these commodities are gaining the attention of policy makers round the world for their potential advantages over traditional fossil fuels such as coal. For example, North et al. (2014) argue that gas contributes to climate change mitigation by reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions if used in electricity generation instead of coal. Similarly, Small et al. (2014) argue these commodities provide a cheap and clean alternative to driving economic growth. However, alongside these benefits, there are also concerns that the development of tight and shale gas resources will bring accompanying social and environmental risks (Jacquet, 2014).

Applied research has provided us with a detailed knowledge of the drivers of trust and social acceptance of extractive industries and how they operate. For example, research conducted by the CSIRO drawing on surveys of more than 44,000 community members in eight countries has quantified the critical role of trust for social acceptance including how the relational aspects of stakeholder interactions can influence this (Moffat et al., 2014a; 2014b; 2018b). Key findings have already identified that:

- As stakeholder expectations and experiences of mining impacts converge, acceptance and approval of an operation increases (i.e. when companies do what they say they will do acceptance is high)
- Procedural fairness (i.e. influence over decisions made by company, respect shown to community) is a strong predictor of trust
- Relationship quality rather than the amount of contact with company personnel is key to building trust.

Such insights can assist industry, communities and governments understand what drives increased trust and, in turn, support stronger relationships between these stakeholders that will lead to better outcomes for all parties and more sustainable and efficient industries.

Alongside this, government authorities play a central role in the development of critical resources such as tight and shale gas. This role is complex with those authorities balancing the need to develop resources for broader economic and societal benefit with the need to ensure environmental standards are met and community concerns are managed appropriately (Parsons et al., 2014). In balancing these needs, it has been argued that risk perceptions of unconventional gas development are dependent in part on the trustworthiness of the responsible authority and its governance (Walton et al., 2013).

## 2.1 The role of risk governance and stakeholder engagement

Risk governance broadly refers to the institutions, rules and processes that relate to how decisions about risk are made and implemented. It has long been recognised that risk analysis, particularly as assessed by scientific and technical experts, can often elicit strong public concerns which in turn may have significant social and economic impacts (Kasperson et al., 1988). This is because the assessment of risk is both scientific and social in its nature. For example, a technical assessment of risk will seek to model the potential impacts of a human activity in terms of a variety of potential impacts (e.g. environmental damage). However, this cannot be divorced from the social context in which it occurs. If disagreement occurs with respect to the nature of risk, it can also give rise to competing claims between social groups. For example, information about risks may come from scientists, government regulators, the media, activist groups, opinion leaders within social groups, personal networks, and/or public agencies (Kaperson et al., 1988) – and that information may not be the same. There has been ample evidence of this in relation to unconventional gas development in Australia.

However, “effective communication is the prerequisite for stakeholder engagement – not a substitute” (Renn, 2015). The need for structured stakeholder and community engagement is widely recognised as giving rise to a range of potential benefits (Bouilly et al., 2005; Reed, 2008; Rowe, 2008; Stern & Coleman, 2015). These potential benefits include recognising that stakeholder engagement: is a critical component of good decision-making; represents a concerted effort to involve those who have a stake in the outcome of a decision being made; potentially yields better decisions by incorporating a range of perspectives and fostering acceptance for a decision outcome; is, in some cases, viewed as a central tenet of sustainable development and a sign of ethically responsible conduct by decision-makers; and, can contribute to better understanding of the social dimensions of challenging issues (Colvin et al., 2016).

In drawing together risk analysis and stakeholder engagement, risk governance provides a way of managing potential risks, or impacts, through a greater emphasis on the role of community and stakeholder engagement in dialogue and deliberation on the issues, interest and concerns that most affect those stakeholders and communities (North et al., 2014; van der Vegt, 2017). The linear model of managing risks that views science as a knowledge generator and communities as knowledge receivers has been widely criticised. Linke et al. (2011) reject this unidirectional approach and calls for ways to bring scientists and stakeholders together where the exchange of knowledge and information related to practice and policy decisions occurs through two-way deliberative processes. Such processes are particularly helpful to address, assess and incorporate different worldviews and human values into deliberations about issues that are complex, uncertain and ambiguous in their nature (Linke et al., 2014).

## 2.2 Towards meaningful engagement

The role of ‘meaningful dialogue’ in understanding how stakeholder and community engagement mechanisms can inform the social accountability and acceptance of unconventional gas projects has been examined (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017a). In particular, the failure to engage stakeholders in meaningful ways has been identified as the predominant cause of social conflict around such developments, and the source of project and potentially, industry failure. This highlights the importance of how meaningful dialogue processes can be designed to foster and develop constructive relationships, trust between parties, understanding, information sharing or knowledge building, procedural fairness, the inclusion of diverse perspectives, and improved outcomes and reputational legitimacy (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017b).

In considering prospective tight and shale gas development in three regions of Australia, the User Panels are set to be the initial mechanism for establishing a meaningful dialogue between the Program and the regions that seeks to realise these kinds of mutually beneficial outcomes across Australia.

### 3 User Panels in the GBA Program

The User Panels in the GBA Program seek to provide clear mechanisms for supporting stronger relationships between the Program and key regional stakeholders and communities in relation to the impacts and potential development trajectories of tight and shale gas in Australia. The Panels also sit within the overarching governance structure of the Program, which is designed to ensure the Program is both scientifically robust and aligns with regional stakeholder and community expectations.

Figure 1 identifies the User Panels (in green) within the Program’s broader governance arrangements.

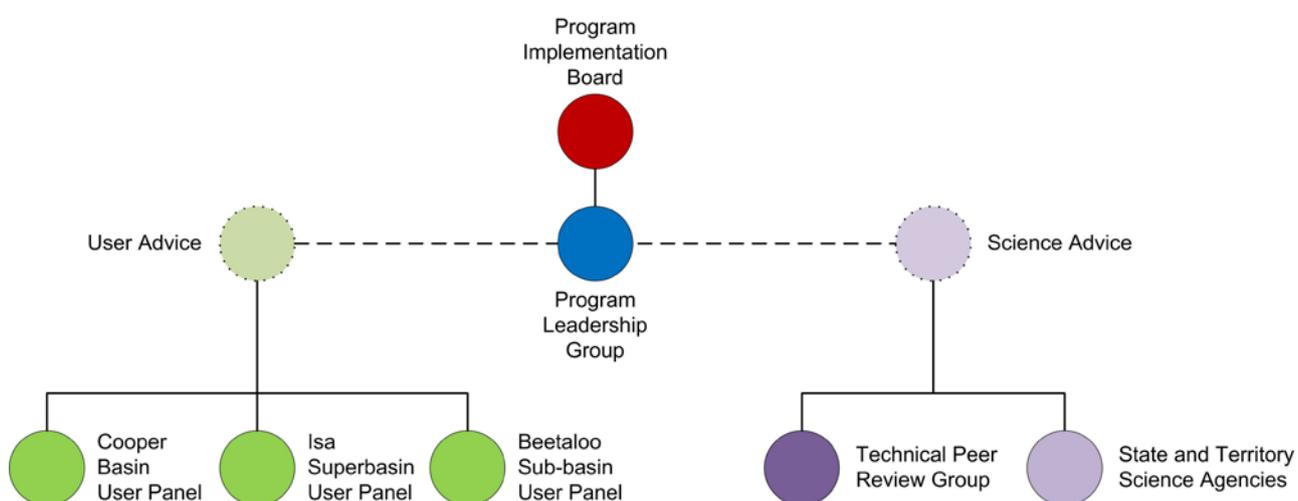


Figure 1. Governance structure for the GBA Program

The governance of the GBA Program clearly identifies that the Program Leadership Group will consider advice from User Panels and use it to scope the assessments to best meet user needs from within the available resources, the scope will then be considered by the Program Implementation Board. This allows government decision-makers to be informed by both good data and science but also to have a clear understanding of the activities and information needs of Basin Users (Bouly et al., 2005).

Broadly, the purpose of these panels will be to inform development of fit-for-purpose assessments including advice on the appropriateness of assessments in meeting needs and concerns of panel members. It is anticipated the Panels will also play a role in strengthening connections between the Program and communities across the region. Finally, the Panels will provide a forum to discuss assessment findings and linkages to other activities in the region.

The **objectives of the User Panels** within the GBA Program are to:

- provide user advice and guidance as assessments are developed for each of the regions selected;

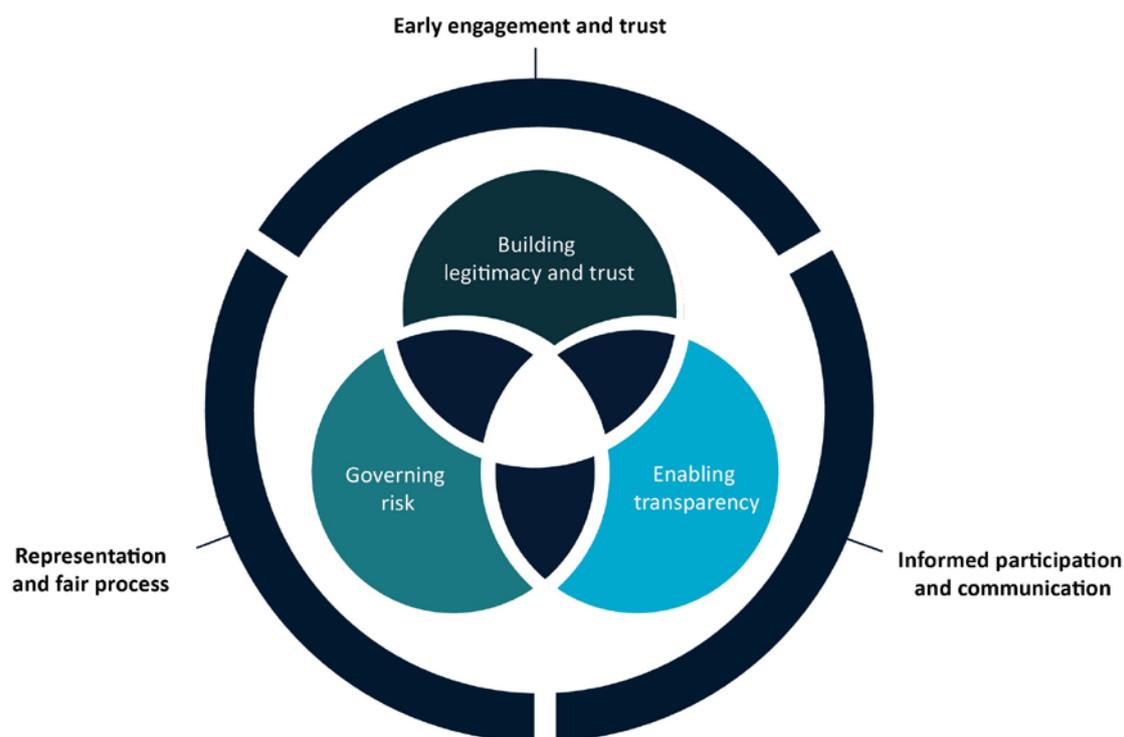
- inform and develop assessments that address the questions and concerns of the users in each region;
- strengthen connections and understanding between the Program and communities across each region;
- build community confidence and trust in the Program design, science and objectives; and
- provide a forum to discuss assessment findings and identify linkages to other activities within each region.

The User Panels are expected to meet twice per year in each region until the conclusion of the Program in June 2021 and will comprise a broadly representative membership that may include local landowners, local water users, NRM bodies, Indigenous groups, local government, State and Commonwealth regulators, shale and tight gas exploration companies (with exploration tenements in the region). It is acknowledged that representation will reflect the key acknowledged stakeholder and community interests recognised in each region and therefore, the membership of Panels may vary across the three regions.

### 3.1 Intended outcomes

The inclusion of User Panels is designed to support strong processes and outcomes for the Program. Figure 2 illustrates the three intersecting outcomes that include:

- Building legitimacy and trust
- Governing risk
- Enabling transparency.



**Figure 2. Intended outcomes of the User Panels within the GBA Program**

### **3.1.1 Building legitimacy and trust**

Establishing representative User Panels in this way can foster legitimacy through open and collaborative involvement of key stakeholder and community interests in discussions about tight and shale gas exploration and development. Through these User Panels, members will also bring valuable insights to the assessment process, which are integral to the success of the Program. This may include but is not limited to stakeholder and community values, perspectives and local knowledge. Understanding regional stakeholder and community perspectives will also help to contextualise the scientific assessments and make them accessible, understandable and useable in practical terms (Rowe et al., 2005). It is reasonably anticipated that the involvement of stakeholder and community representatives through the User Panels will also help to build trust in the Program's findings among all stakeholders and the wider public (Moffat et al., 2018).

### **3.1.2 Governing risk**

The inclusion of User Panels also reflects a form of risk governance through the use of stakeholder and community engagement in their design. Engagement is essential in relation to the management of complex environmental issues (Small et al., 2014). This is particularly the case where complex multi-actor networks and processes are required to deal with collective decisions where there may be identified risks that are characterised by complexity, uncertainty or ambiguity (van der Vegt, 2017). Such approaches combine the management of risks that are associated with potential impacts of resource development (i.e. the scientific advice), alongside the desirability of these consequences for the people affected or the public more broadly (i.e. initially represented by the User Panel advice) (Renn & Schweizer, 2009). The Panels also provide opportunity for mutual exchange between scientists and Panel members (Linke et al., 2011) Although neither the User Panels nor the scientists providing the independent peer review have decision-making authority with respect to the future development trajectory of tight and shale gas exploration or development, the innovation in the design of the GBA Program is this effort to combine both knowledge and values for the decision-makers that will inform recommendations on these matters for the nation.

### **3.1.3 Enabling transparency**

Maintaining transparency is a critical component of the trust building process (Lacey et al., 2018). Alongside this, valuing well-informed stakeholders is essential to achieving transparency of process (Smith et al., 2012). The GBA Program intends to enable transparent mechanisms through User Panels by promoting effective communication and developing pathways to ensure informed participation of stakeholders. It is intended that the representatives of the User Panels may be supported by a broader range of groups that may be existing community groups (whom they represent) or technical communities of practice or expertise. This creates the potential to explore an extended network for enabling two way communication from the Panels out to stakeholder groups and communities, and in turn, to bring those interests and issues to the Panels for consideration (Keywood et al., 2018). By supporting this form of cross-pollination of information, ideas and learnings in both directions, there is enhanced potential to strengthen stakeholder and community understanding of scientific information and for scientific and technical experts to gain a better understanding of community values and local knowledge.

## 3.2 Anticipated limitations

The success of the User Panels requires the time, commitment and good will of multiple parties. The intention is to host a series of regional dialogues that are truly shared by those who are involved and where information flows in multiple directions (e.g. two way conversations between the User Panels and the Program, between the User Panels and the scientists, and between the User Panels and those they represent at the table).

There should be no assumption that the User Panels within the GBA Program represent a broad scale community engagement process, which may be required if new tight and shale gas industries are progressed in Australia. The User Panels represent a strategic early engagement process on a matter of priority for the Australian Government. They do not replace more extensive engagement conducted by other parties in the future.

To be effective for the Program, the Panels also require a representative membership to be able to accurately canvas the relevant range of regional interests and concerns. The Panels will also rely on creating an environment where members can speak openly, explore diverse views on key issues, and potentially host challenging conversations. Section 4 outlines a range of key design principles that will underpin the success of the User Panels and some practical ways of achieving them for consideration.

## 4 Key Design Principles for Effective Basin User Panels

Based on the brief literature review and the intended objectives of the Panels that were examined in Sections 2 and 3, a number of key underlying design principles for developing effective User Panels have been identified here. These key design principles are aligned with the intended outcomes of the User Panels within the broader GBA Program (Table 1).

**Table 1. Aligning intended outcomes with key underlying design principles of the User Panels**

Intended Outcomes	Key Design Principles
<b>Building legitimacy and trust</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Early engagement</li><li>• Trust</li></ul>
<b>Governing risk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Representation on Panels</li><li>• Fair process</li></ul>
<b>Enabling transparency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Informed participation</li><li>• Effective communication</li></ul>

The following sections outline how each of these intended outcomes can be supported by these purposefully selected design principles. Each of the outcomes are examined in turn with a summary of both a description of the design principles and examples of how each principle could be reflected in the structure and prioritisation of Panel activities.

These design principles and how they are executed also provide the basis for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the Panel performance in the GBA Program over time. This is further outlined in Section 5.

### 4.1 Building legitimacy and trust

The core design principles that underpin building trust and legitimacy (Table 2) have been identified as:

- early engagement (Zandvliet & Anderson, 2009); and
- trust (Stern & Coleman, 2015; Lacey et al., 2018; Moffat et al., 2018).

**Table 2. Design principles for building legitimacy and trust**

Key Principle	Summary of Intention	Demonstrated by
<b>Early engagement</b>	<p>GBA is an assessment Program focused on the potential environmental impacts of onshore shale and tight gas development.</p> <p>There is an existing commitment in place to conduct these assessments in three regions in Australia.</p> <p>Stakeholder and community engagement via User Panels is not driven by the existence of conflict or problems (or the need to ‘rubber stamp’ a pre-determined outcome) but a desire to develop relationships in each basin to better understand user needs as part of the assessment process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A commitment to host User Panels in all three regions to develop relationships from commencement of GBA Program.</li> <li>• Initial meeting provides all Panel members context and knowledge of the GBA Program and Panel expectations. This allows members to make a fully informed decision about their commitment and involvement (i.e. are they willing to fully commit and sign on).</li> <li>• Panel members are invited to comment on draft Panel TOR and provide their expectations of the process at first meeting (after Department has outlined their expectations as this might add new objectives that are useful).</li> <li>• An early agenda item might be dedicated to how everyone in the room defines community and stakeholders in each basin (i.e. the term ‘user’ is slightly novel in this context so perhaps an exploration of the nature of living and working in the basin will draw out additional specifics of the regional context, which in turn, may help to identify who else should be included as per principle of representation).</li> </ul>
<b>Trust</b>	<p>Trust among stakeholders and communities around extractive industries has been found to underpin sustainable and positive relationships that are more likely to lead to mutually beneficial outcomes</p> <p>Often built through formal and informal dialogue processes. It is important to identify how reciprocity is reflected in these relationships.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engendered by adherence to the commitments made by all panel members (i.e. signed on and participating fully in respectful interactions within and beyond the panel setting)</li> <li>• Mutual respect based on genuine desire to work together for common good</li> <li>• Confidence in the process</li> <li>• Confidence that diverse basin views are represented (links to Representation &amp; Fair Process)</li> <li>• Increased knowledge of diverse basin interests and priorities in assessing new industries</li> <li>• Confidence in the science of the basin assessments</li> </ul>

## 4.2 Governing risk

The core design principles that underpin governing risk (Table 3) have been identified as:

- representation (Colvin et al., 2016); and
- fair process (Tyler, 2000; Besley, 2010; Lacey et al., 2017).

**Table 3. Design principles governing risk**

Key Principle	Summary of Intention	Demonstrated by
<b>Representation</b>	<p>The purpose of the panels is to reliably reflect a broad cross-section of community and stakeholder interests in each region. These may vary across the three GBA regions but there should be a high degree of confidence among all panel members that the right representatives are ‘at the table’ and no key party has been excluded.</p> <p>Because the panels are focused on building mutual understanding between basin users and the Program, diversity is highly valued in representing the full range of basin interests.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong agreement is reached in each Panel that all interests, opinion shapers/leaders are represented at the table. This may be discussed at first meeting and reviewed annually.</li> <li>• In initial introductions, it may be useful to map the various interests at the table and ask the panel to collectively reflect on whether anyone is missing/overlooked.</li> <li>• Proxy arrangements will support flexibility and representation over the course of the Program.</li> <li>• Government members will prioritise that senior staff are involved and committed to the process.</li> <li>• The focus on achieving committed and representative panels seeks to support relationship building and a strong commitment to the ideal that ‘people matter’ (i.e. socio-economic contexts are critical to the assessment process and people are at the heart of that)</li> <li>• Increased understanding of the representativeness of each panel could be explored by each member articulating their individual and shared needs, values, or objectives (this could be tied to a discussion of expectations or as a separate process)</li> </ul>
<b>Fair process</b>	<p>Fair process refers to whether individuals believe they have had a reasonable voice in contributing to the GBA Program and in their engagement with other basin interests and the Department.</p> <p>By focusing on fair processes as opposed to pursuing fixed outcomes, there can be increased opportunity to create mutual understanding (and bypass transactional relationships).</p> <p>The aim is to create an environment that supports quality dialogue and information exchange between all panel members to support mutual understanding of diverse interests (and areas of mutual gain where relevant).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a safe environment for government and non-government members to speak openly through the development of agreed behavioural guidelines/operational values (i.e. determining the respectful rules of engagement might be an activity that each Panel undertakes at first meeting).</li> <li>• Acknowledge and respect the roles and responsibilities of all members and make a commitment to incorporate local knowledge and values in the Panel dialogue and engagement</li> <li>• Encourage panellists to challenge assumptions (i.e. leverage the diversity of membership to understand where views diverge and why)</li> <li>• While no consensus is required from panels (and they are not decision-making bodies), it may be valuable to identify processes in Panel meetings that focus on creating “collective understanding” of topics including:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Department holding ultimate responsibility for advising future decision-making (user panels provide input)</li> <li>• The established scientific information/data, degree of confidence and what is unknown (engagement with scientific outputs for users; what it means, how it will be used; relevance to user interests and priorities)</li> <li>• Relevant policies/legislation including the opportunities and constraints they create (states may have a stronger role in this and this will build understanding of formal governance structures in relation to risks and opportunities that are explored over time)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## 4.3 Enabling transparency

The core design principles for enabling transparency (Table 4) have been identified as:

- Informed participation (North et al., 2014; Keywood et al, 2018); and
- Effective communication (Renn, 2015; Renn & Schweizer, 2009).

**Table 4. Design principles for enabling transparency**

Key Principle	Summary of Intention	Demonstrated by
<b>Informed participation</b>	<p>The Program creates an opportunity for knowledge sharing and learning where User Panels will have opportunity to advance knowledge and be better informed about both scientific undertakings and stakeholder/ community interests.</p> <p>Well-informed participants help to navigate the mutual exchange of knowledge between scientists and communities. This also reflects the intention of the Program to maintain transparency.</p> <p>Informed participation builds confidence and trust among parties – including those involved in the process and those outside the process who have an interest but are not direct participants.</p> <p>Being transparent about the Panel processes allows for three independent panels to operate within established guidelines (and this is fair and ensures comparability of the process) but there is also room to adapt within those guidelines so each process is context specific (e.g. different mix of interests/members across basins).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communiques from each meeting will be provided to each panel member for sharing more broadly and via the website.</li> <li>• TOR, membership of panels (not individual contact details) and meeting schedules will be made public (via GBA website)</li> <li>• Panel members agree to take responsibility for wider industry/community engagement – this expands the circle of trust ‘beyond the table’ and this allows the formal panel mechanisms to be translated to more informal interactions in the basin.</li> <li>• Findings of scientific assessments will be discussed in depth during User Panel meetings to enable deliberation of the findings and their implications (i.e. science will not simply be presented without discussion)</li> <li>• The Program will support a balance of formal and informal aspects of engagement in each basin (i.e. formal dialogue happened at the User Panel table but informal dialogue can take place outside these settings between panellists and to raise awareness of the process beyond the Panel membership)</li> </ul>
<b>Effective communication</b>	<p>Effective communication provides a base for productive Panellist engagement because supports a deliberative process where parties can include their interests and values in discussion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying how information will be communicated, by who and for what purpose to ensure there is clarity in communication</li> <li>• Identifying the appropriate means of communication for Panel members (where and when)</li> <li>• Communicating Panel business in a timely and concise manner, both internally and externally</li> </ul>

Key Principle	Summary of Intention	Demonstrated by
<p><b>Effective communication continued</b></p>	<p>Communication applies to both communication within Panels and beyond Panels. Members of User Panels can have a significant role in disseminating information and facilitating outreach beyond the Panels.</p> <p>Effective communication is also about adopting a realistic approach to timely and appropriate dissemination of information, and scheduling of meetings. This means setting practical agendas that are achievable in time available, making all tasks time bound.</p> <p>Matters of logistics should also be considered such as ensuring democratic opportunities for all to participate (may include the venue selection in the basins rather than capital cities)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The use of communiques post meeting (communiques can be written collectively at the conclusion of each meeting to ensure participation of all members in reflecting the key points for broader communication)</li> <li>• Panel members commit to communicating to their constituencies</li> <li>• Beyond the formal meetings, there may also be bilateral and multi-lateral program contact with users on an as needs basis between meetings. The need for this will be defined by things such as users holding data the Program needs, clarification of needs, connecting GBA with any parallel regulatory activities that may occur.</li> </ul>

## 5 Monitoring and Evaluation of the Basin User Panels

Given the introduction of User Panels to the GBA Program framework, there is an intention to conduct a targeted monitoring and evaluation (M&E) process to assess the effectiveness and performance of the User Panels over time. The M&E activities in relation to the User Panels specifically within the Program should be designed to elicit a combination of qualitative and quantitative data that will be comparable across time and across regions. A robust data collection process should test a common framework in various locations where membership, local issues and other contextual factors will vary. Recommended methods would include observation at meetings, interviews with Panel and Program members, and surveys to track sentiment over time.

In gathering this data over the course of the Program, the evidence base should be designed to respond to the following specific questions about the process and outcomes of the User Panels:

### ***How well do Program activities and outputs align with the needs of intended users?***

- how well has the Program captured user needs?
- how well have user needs been reflected in the Program scope and activities?
- how well has the Program been able to ascertain and track if user needs have changed with time?

### ***How has data collected by the Program been used by the Program?***

- how well have processes around data transparency met user expectations and government guidelines?

### ***How well is the Program meeting the expectations of intended (and other) users?***

- by whom and in what ways are Program outputs being used/applied?
- which elements of the Program are most useful? Why?

The M&E process has a clear opportunity to provide recommendations to improve Panel process during the course of the Program in order to enhance outcomes.

By aligning data collection back to the intended outcomes of the User Panel design (i.e. building legitimacy and trust; governing risk; and enabling transparency), there will also be scope to examine opportunities for learning across three panels in different geographies within Australia.

For example:

- Were all Panel processes equally effective? Why/why not?
- What are the differences or similarities in the nature of the discussions across Australia?
- What methods were most effective and why?
- Where were the greatest success and challenges experienced? What was learned?

In this way, the investment in the User Panels in the GBA Program may provide useful lessons for other risk governance and engagement processes being implemented by the Department.

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#### CONTACT US

**t** 1300 363 400  
+61 3 9545 2176  
**e** [csiroenquiries@csiro.au](mailto:csiroenquiries@csiro.au)  
**w** [www.csiro.au](http://www.csiro.au)

#### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

**CSIRO Land & Water**  
Justine Lacey  
**t** +61 7 3327 4707  
**e** [justine.lacey@csiro.au](mailto:justine.lacey@csiro.au)  
**w** <https://www.csiro.au/en/Research/LWF>

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