

Combined Inland Critical Water Advisory Panels (CWAP) meeting: 23 March 2020

The Northern Inland Regulated Rivers CWAP, Southern Inland CWAP and Barwon/Lower Darling CWAP convened on 23 March 2020 to discuss the management of northern Basin flows following widespread rainfall from January to March 2020.

A summary of the meeting outcomes is provided below.

Further information on the function and membership of critical water advisory panels can be found in this [fact sheet](#).

Please note: All reasonable efforts have been made to provide accurate and current information in this communique. This information is accurate as at 23 March 2020. However, changes in circumstances such as weather variability, water management decisions or any other events after the time of publication may impact on the accuracy of the material. Water Allocation Statements published by the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment - Water (DPIE-Water) provide the most accurate information on available water and allocations -

www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/allocations/statements

Water availability update

Following widespread rainfall across NSW from the end of January to early March some rivers experienced high flows in sections. The dams in the inland valleys also received some inflows, however; most flows were below the major storages. Overall the flows were not 'drought breaking'.

The drought stages of some systems - Border Rivers, Barwon-Darling, Lower Darling and Gwydir - have improved and an updated map is available on the DPIE-Water website -

www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/drought-update/critical-valleys-in-drought

Information on allocations and the amount of water left in accounts in each valley, as well as current dam levels, can be found on the WaterNSW Water Insights Portal -

www.watarnsw.com.au/waterinsights/water-insights

Below is a summary of conditions in each valley at the time of the meeting:

Border Rivers

There have been good flows observed downstream of the major storages in this valley and some supplementary access has been permitted as a result. Glenlyon Dam has increased from 3.8 to 14 per cent and Pindari Dam from 3.8 to 10 per cent capacity.

While there are flows in the Border Rivers, WaterNSW is not currently making any regulated releases.

Gwydir

There have been good flows downstream of Copeton Dam, with some supplementary access permitted in this system. Collarenebri received some of the heaviest rainfall in this catchment.

Capacity of Copeton Dam has increased from 6 to 14 per cent. Flows are still coming in downstream of the storage so no substantial regulated releases have been made.

Namoi

Rainfall has occurred downstream of storages, resulting in good flows through the Namoi. Pian Creek received full replenishment flows.

Storage in Split Rock Dam has increased from 1 to 4 per cent and Keepit Dam is up from 1.2 to 12 per cent. These catchments were some of the worst affected in NSW.

Restrictions on general security account access have been lifted, however; no additional allocations have been made.

The Upper and Lower Namoi have been moved from Stage 4 to Stage 3 - Severe Drought.

Peel

There have been good flows into the tributaries downstream of Chaffey Dam and restrictions on high security access have been lifted. However, there has not been much improvement in Chaffey Dam's storage (13.9 per cent) and Tamworth's water security has not improved. Drought works to further secure Tamworth's water supply are still proceeding. Tamworth is being supplied through a pipeline from Dungowan, while another pipeline direct from Chaffey Dam will be completed by mid-April.

The Peel Valley remains in Stage 4 - Critical Drought.

Macquarie

There have been good flows into tributaries downstream of storages. The rain has been suitable for meeting a small amount of critical needs in this valley. However, rain around Orange and Bathurst hasn't produced much runoff.

The Macquarie River was closed off at Warren in early spring 2019, with no regulated flows downstream of Warren since then, while Gunningbar Creek was closed in December 2019. The recent flows have allowed WaterNSW to run stock and domestic replenishment flows downstream of Warren.

There have been three events that met triggers under the water sharing plan for supplementary access, but only one event allowed. The Macquarie Marshes have still not received sufficient inflows.

Windamere Dam levels have remained around 26 per cent.

Burrendong Dam is now at 6.7 per cent, up from 1.6 per cent, which extends surface water security for Wellington, Dubbo, Nyngan and Cobar. This will be further secured if restrictions continue and flows are stopped at Warren when the tributary flows finish.

Suspensions on accessing general security water in accounts remain in place. Water sharing plan rules also remain suspended. The Macquarie is still in Stage 4 - Critical Drought.

Fish death response

The rain has been of significant benefit to fish communities in a number of inland river systems. The areas that have been of greatest concern (Namoi, Border Rivers and Barwon Darling) have all received good flows. Cooler weather during February and March and good flow volumes have helped to improve conditions for fish communities.

There was one minor fish death event upstream of Brewarrina and one significant fish death in Lake Wetherell (Menindee Lakes) around 12 March. The Lake Wetherell event consisted mainly of Bony Bream. This species is quite sensitive to changes in the river system, but has the ability to re-colonise very quickly when conditions improve. There have also been reports of small and isolated fish deaths in Copeton Dam (Gwydir).

Fish deaths are now on an encouraging trajectory downwards.

The release strategy for the Lower Darling involves a large pulse release to minimise impacts on fish populations. There are however, still risks around carbon levels and salinity.

DPI-Fisheries are looking at releasing fish back into the wild now that conditions have improved. A total of 4000 fish have been rescued, including 2500 from endangered species. Releasing fish into the Namoi and Macquarie Regulated Rivers does involve risks as there has not been much storage recovery and delivery of flows is uncertain.

Independent assessment of the management of the Northern Basin first flush event

On 10 March, the Hon. Melinda Pavey MP, Minister for Water, Property and Housing, announced an independent assessment of the management of the Northern Basin first flush event.

An independent panel will be asked to assess improvements to:

- communication of water restrictions
- the management of first flush events, including decision making and the application of the public interest test
- regulatory, planning or policy instruments.

DPIE-Water welcomes the inquiry and looks forward to receiving the final report, which is expected by August 2020.

There will be a process for stakeholder consultation on the independent assessment.

Managing the Northern Basin flow event

Following widespread rainfall across NSW from the end of January to early March, temporary water restrictions were placed on regulated general security, some high security and unregulated river access in all northern basin valleys. This included the Border Rivers, Gwydir, Peel, Namoi, and Macquarie, as well as the Barwon-Darling and Intersecting Streams. Restrictions on floodplain harvesting were placed on the Macintyre, Lower Gwydir, Namoi, Lower Namoi, Macquarie and Barwon-Darling floodplains.

Restrictions were put in place to replenish water for critical needs - town water, domestic and stock, and environmental (returning flow to isolated refuge pools). The restrictions commenced on 17 January 2020 for river flows and 7 February 2020 for floodplain harvesting. The northern valley

orders ended on 28 February 2020. New restrictions were put in place just on the Barwon-Darling from 29 February 2020.

Assessments for lifting restrictions were based on actual and forecast flows and flow volume triggers for meeting local and downstream critical needs. Upstream water users were allowed access under normal rules once the nearest downstream triggers were met or forecast to be met and if it was assessed that the event would not meaningfully contribute to meeting any downstream critical needs. If the event would contribute to downstream flows, then access was not permitted. Further principles for guiding decision making include:

- restrictions should be applied consistently across all river systems in the northern NSW basin and within licence categories
- early lifting based on flow forecasts requires high confidence that predictions will exceed triggers
- the timing of upstream restricted flows passing downstream needs to be considered
- potential extraction volumes will be based on maximum daily pump capacities
- at least 12 months of essential supply should be available in the storage before allowing access to suspended general security account water.

The objective was to meet critical needs in the upstream catchments and where possible, contribute flows to the Barwon-Darling. With additional inflows from the Queensland catchments into the Barwon-Darling predicted in mid-February, the target flow of 60 GL into the Menindee Lakes was increased to 200 GL. The 200 GL target was sufficient to provide an initial flush along the Lower Darling to the Murray and then to secure priority needs for at least 12 months.

Recommencing Lower Darling flows

The recommencing of Lower Darling flows aims to connect the Lower Darling to the Murray River in a way that minimises risks to fish and ecosystems and optimises releases to extend security of supply for water users.

There is now enough water in Lake Wetherell to provide the initial pulse release. All block banks are expected to be removed over the next fortnight.

Much larger flows have come into Menindee Lakes since initial inflow estimates were calculated, which will help in reducing water quality risks.

WaterNSW is working closely with DPI-Fisheries and DPIE-EES to ensure the timing and volumes of releases from the lakes maximise fish and ecosystem safety.

A range of monitoring is being undertaken in refuge pools and aerator locations. Further monitoring will be done as the water is released and as flows track downstream. Information from this monitoring will be made publicly available as flows progress.

It is anticipated that increased salt levels will occur, as they did the last time flows were restarted in the Lower Darling. There is however, now enough volume available to minimise risks.

Since the meeting, WaterNSW provided an update on their website on the planned releases - <https://www.waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates>. Releases commenced on 26 March. The department is also providing a series of information sheets explaining the releases and providing water quality updates. These are available at -

www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/drought-update/drought-recovery/menindee-lakes-lower-darling-river

Approach to community engagement

All DPIE-Water and WaterNSW non-essential travel and face-to-face meetings have been cancelled based on advice regarding COVID-19. However, stakeholder consultation will not cease, it will just be done differently. The department is looking at different approaches to enable community consultation to continue. This will include further drought community consultation.

Consultation on the Regional Water Strategies for Macquarie/Castlereagh, Gwydir, Lachlan and Far North Coast will still occur in mid-2020, with final implementation planned for 2021.

Consultation on all other regions will occur in late 2020.

Agencies present

- NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment
 - Water Division
 - Environment, Energy and Science Division
- NSW Department of Primary Industries
 - DPI Agriculture
 - DPI Fisheries
- WaterNSW
- Central Joint Organisation of Councils
- Namoi Joint Organisation of Councils
- Orana Joint Organisation of Councils
- Bourke Shire Council
- Far South West Joint Organisation of Councils
- Narromine Shire Council

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