

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

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Snowy montane river high-flow releases

Stakeholder and Community Engagement Plan

May 2024





Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water acknowledges that it stands on Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and we show our respect for Elders past, present and emerging through thoughtful and collaborative approaches to our work, seeking to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to providing places in which Aboriginal people are included socially, culturally and economically.

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Introduction

The Snowy Water Initiative (SWI) was formally established in 2002 to significantly improve river health by releasing environmental water into the Snowy, upper Murrumbidgee and upper Murray river systems.

Embodied in the Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed 2002 (SWIOID), the SWI is an agreement for water recovery and environmental flows between the NSW, Victorian and Australian governments (the partner governments) and Snowy Hydro. The NSW Government is responsible for the implementation of the SWIOID.

The SWIOID also provides for environmental releases into a number of higher altitude (montane) rivers whose flows are significantly affected by the operation of the Snowy Scheme known as the SMRIF allocation.

The environmental water is released from small weirs as a passing flow, or as managed releases from Tantangara Dam. The NSW Government is responsible for determining the annual release strategy of these environmental flows, which collectively are called the Snowy Montane Rivers Increased Flows (SMRIF).

The annual SMRIF strategy focuses on key aspects, these being:

- Improved daily flow variability.
- A series of high-flow releases to rework the riverbed and improve in instream habitat.
- Frequent smaller releases.

Key issues/considerations

- There is strong community interest in rehabilitating the upper Murrumbidgee River, as well as widespread agreement that the delivery of additional flows is greatly needed.
- The department has previously consulted widely with the local community to identify stakeholders likely to be affected by the planned 2024 high-flow water releases, or who may be able to assist in ensuring the safety of staff, the public and property during the releases.
- The department recognises that effective management of the risks that could arise from the releases requires the support and coordination of many stakeholders.
- For the 2024-25 water year, the New South Wales, Victorian and Australian governments have committed a volume of approximately 87,090 megalitres (ML) to be released into Snowy

montane rivers. Of this, 35,080 ML is planned for release to the upper Murrumbidgee from Tantangara Dam.

- The 2024–25 release strategy uses the natural flow-scaling approach to deliver frequent small releases and a number of larger pulses from Tantangara Dam into the Upper Murrumbidgee River, one of which is more than the 1,400ML/d flow trigger that requires the department to implement the safety management process. This threshold value represents the flow at which potential safety impacts may begin to occur. The “high-flow” event will peak at 1,500 ML/d, which is the limit of the dam’s release infrastructure without requiring Snowy Hydro to actively target high reservoir levels.
- This high-flow release and other smaller flow releases are designed to mimic the natural characteristics of the Murrumbidgee River, including snowmelt and ‘freshes’ that occurred before the construction of the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

Key water release dates

There will be 8 days where flows will be above 500 ML/day across 3 peak events, including 4 days of flows above 1,000 ML to move fine sediment and inundate low lying benches. The highest of these planned flow events will be 1,500 ML/day with details shown below.

Date	Volume of release
Tuesday 24 September 2024	Daily peak flow of 1,500 ML/d over 24 hours

Note: The 24-hour release period from Tantangara Dam commences at 12.00pm midday local time, this is to allow for manual operation of releases above 500 ML/d.

Environmental flows from Tantangara Dam will vary in volume but will be continuous between 1 May 2024 and 4 January 2025 and between 27 March and 30 April.

A series of small ‘freshes’ will also be provided from January to March 2025 to recharge the system between periods of zero environmental release.

About this stakeholder and community engagement plan

The stakeholder and community engagement activities outlined in this plan have been developed in line with the department's Stakeholder and Community Engagement Policy (IND-I-245) to ensure effective and genuine engagement with stakeholders and the broader community to achieve better public policy outcomes, improved service delivery and enhanced customer service.

The methodologies and actions listed in this plan demonstrate a transparent and consistent approach in relation to stakeholder and community engagement and have been developed using the principles of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) model.

These principles include:

- **Purposeful** – deliver on NSW Government priorities, corporate goals with a clear understanding of what we want to achieve.
- **Inclusive** – the identification of all stakeholders and enabling participation.
- **Timely** – clear identification of timeframes and allow sufficient time for meaningful consultation.
- **Transparent** – clearly explain the engagement, consultation and implementation processes and provide the information necessary to enable meaningful and purposeful participation.
- **Respectful** – ensure engagement activities acknowledge and cater for the differing needs, perspective and levels of understanding of participants.

Objectives

The aim of this Stakeholder and Community Engagement Plan is to outline the key activities to be undertaken during the 2024-2025 water year, but predominantly focusing on the one planned “high-flow” event in September. A “high-flow” releases is defined as greater than 1,400 ML/day.

The department has prepared a *Tantangara Safety Management Plan (SMP)* to identify and manage public and staff risks associated with the planned environmental water releases. This plan reflects the communication requirements of the SMP.

This plan will:

- Identify agency responsibilities and actions to be undertaken within specified timelines and methods to ensure the principles of the department's engagement policy are achieved.
- Identify and define the approach, methods and collateral material to engage stakeholders to inform them of, and assist them to prepare for, the Tantangara Dam releases.
- Ensure appropriate action is undertaken in a timely manner to inform stakeholders and the community, with particular emphasis on down-stream landholders, of the planned 'high-flow' water releases, the anticipated dates of each release, the associated volumes of each release, and the potential water depths at existing gauges downstream of Tantangara Dam.

Engagement purpose

To effectively engage with relevant stakeholders regarding the Snowy montane rivers environmental high-flow events by:

- Informing all interested parties of planned 'high-flow' events for the water year between 1 May and 30 April.
- Providing interested stakeholders and the broader community with access to relevant materials regarding high-flow events.
- Ensuring interested people, particularly landholders immediately down-stream of Tantangara Dam, are aware of planned high-flow events, their timing and magnitude.

Stakeholders targeted under this plan

- Commonwealth, NSW and Government agencies
- Snowy Hydro Limited
- Snowy Advisory Committee
- Landholders along the Upper Murrumbidgee River
- Snowy Monaro Regional Council
- NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service
- NSW Roads and Maritime Services
- State Emergency Service
- Bureau of Meteorology
- Local Land Services

- State/Regional/Local media organisations
- Local businesses within the Snowy region
- Recreational fishing industry
- Recreational campers and tourists
- Community interest groups
- Members of the general public
- Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water – staff
- The National Trail

Key messages

Specific details for 2024/25 high-flow releases

- There is one scheduled high-flow environmental water release of 1,500ML/d to the upper Murrumbidgee River planned for 2024, on Tuesday 24 September.
- The high-flow release to the upper Murrumbidgee River will have a peak of 1,500 megalitres per day over 24 hours, increasing and decreasing either side with the event spanning a period of 72 hours above 500 ML/d.
- Two moderate releases will occur on Monday 22 July (1,200 ML/day) and Tuesday 20 August (1,375 ML/d). The department and Safety Technical Advisory Group (STAG) consider that these volumes are unlikely to pose a safety risk.
- In total over the year there will be 8 days where flows will be above 500 ML/day across 3 peak events, including 4 days of flows above 1,000 ML to move fine sediment and inundate low lying benches.
- Environmental flows from Tantangara Dam will vary in volume but will be continuous between 1 May 2024 and 4 January 2025 and between 27 March and 30 April 2025.
- A series of small ‘freshes’ will also be provided from January to March 2025 to recharge the system between periods of zero environmental release.
- Flow may be modified and cancelled subject to climatic, environmental or operational conditions at the time.

General details for all high-flow releases

- “High-flow“ releases are those in excess of 1,400 ML/day. This is the threshold above which flows may have the potential for creating safety risks, based on local risk knowledge and evidence from past releases. Smaller releases are also made throughout the water year.
- The days leading up to and following high-flow releases will have intermediate flows to create a more natural flow release pattern (hydrograph) that maximises ecological benefits.

Changes to planned dates and volumes

- Planned flows may be modified or cancelled subject to climatic, environmental or operational conditions near to the time of release.
- The department will endeavour to inform the public of changes to large flow releases, where possible.

- Whilst the volumes of smaller releases are also planned at the start of the year, these may be changed at any time without notice. This allows greater flexibility in the delivery of environmental releases, which provides improved environmental outcomes.

Why releases are being made

- Environmental water releases to the Snowy montane rivers are mandated under the *Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed 2002*, a tri-government agreement between the Australian, New South Wales and Victorian Governments, to achieve significant improvements in river health.

Design of the flow release patterns

- The timing and duration of high-flow events varies from year to year, based on natural inflows to the upper Murrumbidgee catchment.
- High-flow water releases are designed to better mimic the natural flow characteristics that are seen in Snowy montane rivers, with the aim of improving the long-term health of these river systems.
- High-flow environmental water releases improve the health of the upper Murrumbidgee River by flushing sediment, clearing vegetation that encroaches into the channel, providing opportunities for fish and other native animals to move, and wetting and filling riverside wetland areas.
- A series of smaller flow releases has been demonstrated to improve river health by establishing a new smaller channel, wetting the riparian zone and promoting the establishment of aquatic and riparian vegetation.

Safety messaging

- The release of environmental water into the Snowy montane rivers over a series of high-flow events has been successfully trialled since 2011.
- Downstream landholders are encouraged to make appropriate plans ahead of the water releases, including securing watercraft and moving stock, pumps and infrastructure to higher ground.
- Measures to ensure safe management of high-flow releases are detailed in the Safety Management Plan, which is available on the NSW DCCEEW-Water website.

Supporting materials

- Fact sheet: Frequently Asked Questions – provides overview of the high-flow water release events.
- Tintangara Safety Management Plan – identifies risks associated with the high-flow water release events and outlines the management of these risks for both the general public and staff.
- Rising River Alerts – provides specific details for each of the three high-flow events in relation to timing, volume and anticipated river level heights down-stream of Tintangara Dam for the duration of each of the water releases.

Agency responsibilities for high-flow events

All STAG members are expected to undertake the following tasks:

- Provide technical advice to the STAG Chair based on the agency's expertise and local knowledge, on the potential risks and impacts of the releases and appropriate mitigation measures.
- Provide advice to the STAG chair on whether the SMP and flows should proceed.
- Ensure agency attendance at all STAG meetings and provide timely responses to STAG meeting actions.
- Distribute media releases and Rising River Alerts through their own agencies communication channels as required.
- Assist with community engagement as required.

Additional tasks specific to individual agencies are listed in the following table.

Agency	Responsibility
NSW DCCEEW-Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop the Safety Management Plan • Lead implementation of processes detailed in the Safety Management Plan • Chair Tantangara STAG • Provide secretariat support to Tantangara STAG • Coordinate all public and stakeholder communications prior to high-flow releases • Reply to contentious issues and enquires • Make decision in consideration of advice of the Tantangara STAG
DCCEEW Corporate Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement the Stakeholder Engagement and Communications Plan • Undertake all public and stakeholder communications prior to high-flow releases
NSW DCCEEW-BCS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of Snowy Montane Rivers Increased Flow (SMRIF) release pattern • Develop the SMRIF Operations Plan • Work with Snowy Advisory Committee to ensure they consider risks in planning future SMRIF release patterns • Liaise with impacted stakeholders
The Bureau	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide advice to the STAG on rainfall forecasts (Note BoM do not undertake flood forecast modelling for Tantangara releases)
NSW SES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NSW SES is the legislated Combat Agency for floods and is responsible for the control of flood operations. NSW SES work with the Bureau and Councils to develop warning systems. • Responsible for flood consequence management
ACT SES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACT SES is the legislated Combat Agency for floods and is responsible for the control of flood operations. ACT SES work with the Bureau and Councils to develop warning systems. • Responsible for flood consequence management
Snowy Hydro Limited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure releases are able to be undertaken safely • Operate infrastructure to make releases to the Murrumbidgee River • Cease / alter releases (from this plan) when directed by DCCEEW-Water
Snowy Monaro Regional Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist in providing up to date contact details for downstream landholders • Install additional signage where necessary
NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Install additional signage to alert park users including campers in camping areas • Erect road closed signs as required

Direct actions for high-flow events

Action item	Responsibility	Comment
Provide FAQ's factsheet	NSW DCCEEW-Water and NSW DCCEEW Corp Comms	The factsheet will be made publicly available via the department's website, emailed directly to downstream landholders (those with listed contact details) and via the STAG.
Provide updates on the down-stream landholder and key stakeholders contact list to NSW DCCEEW	NSW DCCEEW-BCS NSW DCCEEW-Water and NSW DCCEEW Corp Comms	<p>Opt-in list data is collected by NSW DCCEEW BCS, via its website.</p> <p>This information is input directly into a contact list held by the Snowy Licence Team.</p> <p>SMS contacts added to Borealis by Snowy Licence Team and Email contacts forwarded to Comms Team for inclusion on their list.</p> <p>Media contacts maintained by Media Team, including interstate.</p> <p>Amendments made following requests from individuals, or following bump back on emails.</p> <p>Other agencies submit direct request to NSW DCCEEW-Water or the department, for removal or inclusion of representatives</p>
Advise Local Police and SES of the planned high-flows and seek comment on any issues they perceive	NSW DCCEEW Corp Comms	Act on any issues identified.
Email landholders below Tintangara Dam along the upper Murrumbidgee River (those with listed contact details) and key stakeholders advising of the timing and magnitude of the flows	NSW DCCEEW Corp Comms	The department to make direct contact with downstream landholders (those with listed contact details) and key stakeholders approximately 4 to 6 weeks prior to first high-flow event – then ongoing as required.
Distribute 2024 Snowy montane rivers high-flows FAQs to relevant SES offices for display	NSW DCCEEW Corp Comms	The department to prepare FAQs in PDF format and distribute to STAG – further copies will be emailed to external contacts as required.

Action item	Responsibility	Comment
<p>Issue a total of one media release/notice including one rising river alert approximately seven days prior to the respective flow release to inform the affected communities.</p> <p>Media outlets to be targeted:</p> <p>Snowy Monaro Regional Council – e-news</p> <p>Shire Wire</p> <p>Snowy Magazine</p> <p>Jindabyne Summit Sun</p> <p>Monaro Post</p> <p>XL FM</p> <p>Snow FM</p> <p>ABC Radio South East</p>	NSW DCCEEW Corp Comms	Media release providing ‘overview’ of the high-flow water releases issued May 2024 - and then ‘Rising river alerts’ to be issued 7 days before the planned releases.
Provide Departmental ‘Customer Experience’ staff with all up-to-date information to answer any requests received	NSW DCCEEW-Water and NSW DCCCEEW Corp Comms	‘Customer Experience’ staff to be provided with all relevant information – May 2024
Release the ‘Tantangara Safety Management Plan’ – to be placed on the department’s website and sent to members of the inter-agency working group	NSW DCCEEW Corp Comms	<p>Updated ‘Tantangara Safety Management Plan’ provided to interagency working group members – May 2024.</p> <p>Updated ‘Tantangara Safety Management Plan’ uploaded to NSW DCCEEW website – May 2024.</p>
Update the department’s website to ensure it contains the latest information on the Tantangara Dam environmental releases – will need to create a new ‘Tantangara Dam’ website landing page	NSW DCCEEW Corp Comms	<p>‘Snowy Montane Rivers Increased Flows website (Tantangara Dam landing page) updated to coincide with the issuing of the ‘overview’ media release.</p> <p>Overview media release to be issued in May 2024.</p>

Evaluation

The following qualitative data will be used to indicate if this plan has successfully achieved its objectives.

Objective	Key indicators of success
<p>Identify and define the best approach to engage key target groups to better inform them of planned high-flow water releases.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ media coverage resulting from the ‘overview’ media release issued announcing the planned winter-spring high-flow water releases.▪ the number of media requests for interviews received.▪ the amount of positive/negative/incorrect media coverage (through media monitors).▪ stakeholder and landholder comments in both traditional and social media.▪ direct feedback from down-stream landholders as a result of the outlined notification process for planned high-flow water releases during winter-spring.▪ visits to the department’s website for information on the Snowy River environmental water releases.▪ feedback from inter-agency members.