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A fairer system for healthier floodplains



The NSW Government is regulating floodplain harvesting for the first time. The reform is vital to ensure everyone is only taking their fair share, and for protecting the environment and downstream communities.

Floodplain harvesting — policy context

In 2008, the NSW Government declared that water users taking water directly from floodplains would need to hold a licence and a water supply works approval. The NSW Floodplain Harvesting Policy and the NSW Floodplain Harvesting Measurement Policy were created to provide a framework for licensing and measuring floodplain harvesting take. To have legal force, they now need to be incorporated into the legislative framework.

Reform means more water flowing downstream

For many years the NSW Government has been bringing all elements of water take into a licensing framework. Floodplain harvesting is the last significant form of take to be licensed. Our data shows floodplain harvesting has grown above the limits set in the Murray-Darling Plan 2012 and the NSW water sharing plans.

Under the new policy, landowners harvesting floodplains will need a licence to do so, as well as accurate and reliable metering equipment that is fitted with tamper-evident seals and telemetry. Licensing and measurement will help return

floodplain harvesting to legal limits where growth has occurred and will also ensure that the practice is sustainable. Stopping the reform doesn't change the amount of water that can be taken under water source limits, but it does remove our ability to control when and how floodplain harvesting is being taken.

Public and stakeholder consultation has been extensive

The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment has been consulting on reform since 2008. In 2020 alone, the department advertised extensively over various channels to reach an audience of 1,500,000 people with more than 700 submissions received from the full range of stakeholders.

Consultation has been on-going with eligible landholders, the broader community and stakeholder groups, including dryland farmers, environmental groups, southern Basin groups, First Nations people and government agencies. There have been numerous public webinars, targeted sessions, face-to-face meetings, public exhibition and submission periods, site inspections and individually tailored meetings to ensure feedback is heard and incorporated.



Stakeholder engagement session



Federation Farm installation of measurement device

We have invested heavily in data and science to improve our understanding of current and historic floodplain harvesting

It has been difficult to reliably determine the volume of floodplain harvesting occurring because it has not yet been volumetrically licensed or metered. As part of floodplain harvesting reform, we have invested significantly in data, satellite imagery and modelling over the last eight years. This has vastly improved our understanding of floodplain harvesting both now and in the past.

Our models use multiple lines of evidence to understand the impacts that development, water user behaviour and water sharing rules have on flows and diversions in each valley. This evidence includes; surveys, on-ground inspections, river flows, metered diversions, remote sensing, flood studies and hydraulic models. Details on how the models are developed and the results of the modelling are provided for each valley.

All modelling is independently peer reviewed. Data, information and assessments relating to floodplain harvesting are available to the public from the Healthy Floodplains web pages, providing complete transparency to increase public confidence.

Licensing and measurement will increase the accuracy of floodplain harvesting models

All models have some uncertainty and one of the key current sources of uncertainty is the lack of historic metering information for floodplain harvesting that could otherwise form an important line of evidence for model calibration. Once the policy is implemented, floodplain harvesting will be measured in near real-time through continuous data loggers fitted to private on-farm storages used for floodplain harvesting.

The new data will allow the department to refine the modelling over time with any improvements reconciled through the annual water allocation process.

The reform doesn't change the water source legal limits – it improves our compliance and accounting

Accurate measurement is vital to enforcing water limits under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. Licensing floodplain harvesting in the northern Basin will ensure that this take of water is properly accounted for and will also enable effective compliance and enforcement. Returning floodplain harvesting to legal limits will improve security of water supply for downstream users and the environment.

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