

A combined Critical Water Advisory Panel meeting was held on 4 December 2019.

The meeting included a session covering the state-wide overview, followed by individual sessions for each critical water advisory panel:

- the Southern Panel (covering the Lachlan, Murray and Murrumbidgee valleys) – Meeting No. 3.
- the Barwon-Darling/Lower Darling – Meeting No. 7; and
- the Northern Inland Panel (covering the Gwydir, Namoi, Macquarie, NSW Border Rivers and Peel valleys) – Meeting no. 8.

Further information on the function and membership of critical water advisory panels can be found in the [Critical Water Advisory Panel 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 4 December 2019. 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 and are available.

Recent NSW Government announcements

Water resource plans

The Deputy Premier and Minister for Regional NSW, the Hon. John Barilaro and Minister for Water and Housing, the Hon. Melinda Pavey released a media statement on 3 December 2019 regarding the Murray Darling Basin Plan and the completion of NSW water resource plans.

At this stage, the Department is continuing to work towards the submission of draft NSW water resource plans to the Murray Darling Basin Authority before the end of the year for accreditation.

Water Supply (Critical Needs) Act 2019

The Water Supply (Critical Needs) Bill 2019 was passed by the NSW Parliament on 14 November 2019. The Governor signed the Bill on 21 November 2019, so the Bill has become an Act and is now in force.

The new legislation is designed to fast track the development of critical town water supplies. It will be in effect for two years and can only be extended by up to 12 months by the Minister for Water, should towns continue to experience severe drought risks.

The legislation also supports the investment of over \$1 billion in the construction of new major dam projects, by declaring these projects Critical State Significant Infrastructure. These include:

- construction of a \$650 million upgrade of Wyangala Dam in the Lachlan valley;
- \$480 million for a new larger Dungowan Dam near Tamworth in the Peel valley; and
- a proposed new dam on the Mole River (Border Rivers).

The Legislative Assembly also declared the Western Weirs Program, which involves the removal, replacement or upgrade of weirs in the Barwon Darling/Lower Darling, as critical state significant infrastructure.

Priority is also given to fast track a number of emergency town water supply works to secure supplies for the townships of Dubbo, Wellington, Warren, Nyngan, Cobar, Tamworth and surrounds, Orange and surrounds, Walgett and Bourke.

Further information on the Bill can be found on the [NSW Parliament website](#).

Additional \$87.76 million for water infrastructure projects

On 26 November 2019 in Dubbo, the Deputy Premier and Minister for Regional NSW John Barilaro and Minister for Water Melinda Pavey made the latest funding announcement for securing emergency water supplies during the drought. This includes:

- \$15m for water carting and emergency infrastructure to small regional towns
- \$38.66m for critical town water infrastructure projects in the state's north and west
- \$4.6m to fund business & household water savings programs for towns most at risk
- \$29.5m for capital water infrastructure projects
- \$2m pipeline in Bourke.

NSW Office of Drought Response

The NSW Government is broadening its focus on drought and adopting three distinct and equal priorities:

- Water security
- Community and business
- Farms and primary production support.

The Office of Drought Response will coordinate support for these three priority areas across the NSW Government, to ensure resources and expertise is effectively coordinated, implemented and delivered.

Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator James McTavish will continue working with communities and local councils to ensure regional towns do not run dry and ensure emerging local water issues are quickly identified and resolved. James McTavish and the Office of Drought Response will work closely together to assess issues and risks as they arise and facilitate the right response for each.

The Office of Drought Response is also going to coordinate communications to ensure communities are fully aware of what support is available. The [media release](#) announcing the establishment of the Office is available online.

Community drought information sessions

DPIE-Water and WaterNSW held a third series of public information sessions in drought affected valleys across the state between 17 October and 28 November. A webinar was also held on 3 December 2019 to provide a state-wide overview for those who could not attend a face-to-face session.

The purpose of these sessions was to provide communities with an update on current drought conditions and preparations for managing remaining water supplies over the summer. Participants were also given the opportunity to provide feedback to government on the work being done and to raise local issues of concern. Information gathered during these sessions was fed back to the critical water advisory panels to inform discussions around drought management measures.

The presentations from these sessions and a report on the key issues raised and responses are available on the [drought information sessions webpage](#).

Further drought information sessions will be held early next year.

NSW Native Fish Drought Response Strategy 2019/20

The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) has advised that further fish deaths will occur if dry and very low flow conditions persist across NSW. Runoff from areas burnt by bushfires can also lead to poor river water quality and result in fish deaths.

A range of responses are underway to protect native fish stocks. These include fish rescues and relocations, provision of water in some limited cases, installation of aerators to improve water quality in key fish refuge areas and the formation of valley-based technical assessment groups.

More information on the [NSW Native Fish Drought Response Strategy 2019/20](#) can be found on the DPI website.

NSW Extreme Water Quality Event Management Plan

DPIE-Water is currently working with NSW agencies to better coordinate government's response to a range of extreme water quality events. A management plan is being developed to address blue green algae blooms, high salinity, blackwater and reduced oxygen levels. The plan defines roles and responsibilities, identifies measures to reduce impacts and describes how communication will occur.

The Critical Water Technical Advisory Group, a subset of the critical water advisory panels, is the primary conduit for cross-agency advice and event response. Further information on the approach will be provided in January 2020.

Regional Water Strategies

The NSW Government is developing 20-year regional water strategies in partnership with communities to help determine the best long-term, tailored and enduring solutions for 12 regions across NSW by 2020. They aim to address major water challenges, set clear priorities and identify opportunities to secure water supplies. The strategies consider both policy and infrastructure solutions.

The overall objective of the strategies is to:

- deliver and manage water for local communities, including towns;
- enable economic prosperity;
- protect and enhance the environment; and
- recognise and protect Aboriginal cultural values and rights.

The strategies will include climate modelling, considering long term data and increased risks associated with climate change.

Currently, targeted consultation with local councils and Aboriginal Nations in the Macquarie, Gwydir and Lachlan is occurring. Draft strategies for these valleys will be released by March 2020 and all 12 strategies to be released by the end of 2020.

Drought situation and potential management responses

General outlook

All the major inland NSW river systems, except the Murrumbidgee Valley, are classified in either emerging (Murray), severe (Lachlan, Gwydir) or critical drought (Border Rivers, Peel, Namoi, Macquarie, Barwon-Darling and Lower Darling). Valleys in the north and far-west are experiencing record low inflows, in most cases worse than the previous drought of record. The Bureau of Meteorology is forecasting a hot and dry summer with no likely improvement in rainfall conditions over the next three months.

A number of [temporary water restrictions](#) are in place in the northern and far west valleys. These include restrictions on access to general security carryover water and restrictions on access to recent flows in the Barwon-Darling River.

Lachlan

To preserve supplies in the Lachlan regulated river, restrictions on carryover and high security allocations were announced on 1 July 2019. However with continuing low inflows, further measures are required to ensure that town water supplies can be met until at least October 2020.

Replenishment flows to lower Lachlan creeks have now ceased (as of week of 8 December) and flows to the Willandra Creek system will cease between December 2019 and March 2020. WaterNSW is working with landholders in the Wallamundry Creek system to manage likely low flows in those creeks. A small saving can also be made by efficient deliveries to Booberoi Creek.

If dry conditions continue, top up flows to offset evaporation in Lake Cargelligo will need to cease from March 2020. This will extend remaining supplies in Wyangala Dam. It will take a number of months for the lake level to decline. WaterNSW has discussed this measure with the Lake Cargelligo community.

Belubula

Carcoar Dam is at 16%. On 1 October 2019, carryover was temporarily restricted by 60%. Block releases commenced in October 2019 and are occurring with a 2-3 week gap to deliver unrestricted account water and manage remaining supplies.

This is a relatively small system and has experienced dry conditions for three years. However conditions are not yet more severe than previous droughts.

Murrumbidgee

Despite persistently low general security allocations, the Murrumbidgee Valley is the best placed in inland NSW for water availability and deliverability. The valley is in Stage 1 drought, with normal system operations in place. Relatively high prices on the trade market are seeing water from the Murrumbidgee being moved around the valley, with demand also from the Murray.

Murrumbidgee drought conditions are currently 12-18 months behind other valleys to the north. Current forecasts indicate that carryover and high priority commitments are likely to be met in the next water year.

Further communication with water users on possible allocations for the new water year will commence in March 2020, once the peak summer period has ended, through the Water Allocation Statements.

Allocations for aquifer water access licence holders in the Lower Murrumbidgee deep groundwater source were set at 70% on 1 July 2019 to manage concerns around extraction above the extraction limit. Allocations were subsequently increased on 23 August 2019 to 100% once meter readings for the previous year were confirmed.

NSW Murray

The Murray continues to operate as normal under the Murray Darling Basin Agreement and sharing arrangements between the three states. The NSW Murray is currently in Stage 2 Emerging Drought with no risk to critical human needs. It is about 12 months behind other valleys in the north in terms of risks. All high priority commitments can be met this year.

Next year's town water supply is likely to be secure, with most of the recent inflows being reserved to meet the other high priority requirements for next water year. The Murray is currently more affected by reduced supply from the Snowy Scheme than the Murrumbidgee.

From mid-March 2020 onward, outlooks on potential 2020/21 water availability conditions will be published and updated monthly to help water users in their planning and decision making. After the peak summer demand period, the Department will be better placed to see how water resources are holding up in this valley.

Lower Darling

Recent flows in the Barwon-Darling during November 2019 will not reach Menindee Lakes.

The Menindee town water supply was switched over from Copi Hollow to the bore located in town on the weekend of the 30 November 2019 as Copi Hollow supplies continue to decline.

Lake Wetherell is down to record low levels. WaterNSW is currently releasing 5ML/day to Weir 32, with Lake Wetherell expected to be empty by December or January.

There is no flow in the river downstream of Weir 32, which had been cut off since February 2018. Due to the depletion of supplies in the temporary weirs, there is now no or very little water left along the length of the Lower Darling.

Barwon-Darling Unregulated

Information on the recent rainfall event on 2-3 November 2019 in the Barwon-Darling can be found in the [WaterNSW water availability report](#). Rainfall of 95mm was observed at Bourke and around 51mm at Brewarrina over two days. This event resulted in flows over Bourke Weir, the first in approximately 450 days, and flows in the Warrego River down to Louth and Tilpa. However flows are not expected to reach Wilcannia because of the high volumes of water naturally consumed along a dry river bed.

The works at Toorale passed all the Warrego flows, which remained in-channel and were not lost to the floodplain. Peebles dam has been removed and the modification of other structures at Toorale, including installation of fish passage, will occur over the next year or so. Further information on the [Toorale Water Infrastructure Project](#) is available on the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment website.

A Section 324 temporary water restriction was announced on 4 November 2019 for A, B and C class licences to protect flows for town water, basic landholder rights, stock and domestic use and to replenish refuge pools. There is now no flow along the whole length of the Barwon-Darling.

A number of [algae alerts](#) have been issued for the Barwon-Darling, including at Brewarrina, Bourke, Wilcannia and Lake Wetherell. Details of current algae alerts can be found on the WaterNSW website here.

The drought information session held for the Barwon-Darling in Wilcannia on 17 October coincided with stakeholder consultation on the [draft Barwon-Darling Watercourse Water Resource Plan](#). Feedback was sought on a number of water sharing plan rule changes designed to better protect low flows and licensed environmental water coming from upstream regulated tributaries.

Until the updated water sharing plan is implemented, the department will continue to use 324 restrictions to protect flows for critical needs when necessary.

Macquarie

Drought contingency measures, including the suspension of parts of the water sharing plan and suspending all general security carryover from 1 July 2019, were required to protect remaining supplies for critical needs. Water savings have been made by ceasing flows downstream of Warren Weir and flows to Crooked Creek and Duck Creek. Flows into Gunningbar Creek have also now ceased (as of the week of 9 December 2019).

Storage levels in Burrendong Dam will be down to 1% in the coming months under current inflows, and this will be the trigger for additional releases from Windamere Dam, extending critical supplies until June 2020. If conditions do not improve, deep storage pumps will be activated at Burrendong Dam to access the dead storage.

There is currently a red alert for blue green algae at Burrendong Dam and an amber alert at Windamere Dam. Water users taking water from the river for their domestic supplies will need to be aware of the water quality risks. WaterNSW has installed aerators/mixers in Burrendong Dam to improve water quality.

Peel

WaterNSW has installed the temporary weir at Dungowan as part of Stage 1 works to extend water supplies for Tamworth. This will enable water to be pumped from this weir to the existing

Dungowan-to-Tamworth pipeline. The water sharing plan's minimum daily release rule from Chaffey Dam has now been suspended (2 December 2019). Water will be released from Chaffey Dam in pulses instead to support critical habitat to Dungowan. Some water users downstream of the Dungowan weir have been installing off river storages and looking to alternative supplies such as groundwater and use of treated effluent.

Stage 2 works involves a pipeline from Chaffey Dam to the Dungowan pipeline to extend supplies for Tamworth to February 2021.

There is an amber blue green algal alert in Chaffey dam.

Upper and Lower Namoi

No water has been released from Keepit Dam to the Lower Namoi since December 2018. Keepit Dam is now at 1% of storage, and has experienced record low inflows over the past 12 months. Water users in the Lower Namoi are relying on groundwater supplies.

In the Upper Namoi, WaterNSW has been advising water users that releases from Split Rock Dam will cease. The remaining water in Split Rock Dam will be reserved for Barraba and Manilla.

Options for delivering water to Manilla are being considered to minimise potential losses, including block releases from the dam and increased pump capacity from the town's weir on the unregulated river.

The implementation of these measures will extend water availability for these towns until at least winter/spring 2020.

There is an amber blue green algal alert in Keepit Dam.

Gwydir

The Gwydir regulated river should continue to run for this year and into 2020 as there is currently sufficient storage in Copeton Dam, although releases will be in blocks and there will be intermittent domestic and stock supply. Towns in the Gwydir, with the exception of Inverell which pumps directly from the storage, have access to groundwater supplies.

An environmental release of 2,000 ML occurred recently to top up native fish refuge pools. There is some remaining high security and environmental water (both licensed and Environmental Contingency Allowance) held in storage.

There is an amber blue-green algal alert in Copeton Dam.

NSW Border Rivers

Most of the critical town water supply needs for this system are on the Queensland side of the border. There will be no further releases from Glenlyon Dam since water was released to refill the Boggabilla and Goondiwindi weirs in November 2019. Without further inflows, water will not be provided downstream of Boggabilla. This should provide sufficient water to upstream towns until May/June 2020. Mungindi is reliant on water remaining in the town weir and will also need to access groundwater.

If required, a release could be made from Pindari Dam to Goondiwindi later next year. Ashford's requirements, being close to Pindari Dam, should be able to be met from minimum flow releases.

Agencies Present

Department of Planning, Industry and Environment – Water
Department of Planning, Industry and Environment – Environment, Energy and Science
Department of Planning Industry and Environment – Regional NSW
Department of Planning, Industry and Environment – Communications
Department of Primary Industries – Fisheries
Department of Primary Industries – Agriculture
NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet
WaterNSW
NSW Environment Protection Authority
NSW Office of Drought Response
NSW Health
Lachlan Council
Cowra Council
Orana Water Utilities Alliance
Central Joint Organisation of Councils
Far North West Joint Organisation of Councils
Namoi Joint Organisation of Councils

Next meeting

The next combined Critical Water Advisory Panel meeting will be convened early next year following further community engagement.

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