

Northern Critical Water Advisory Panel (CWAP)

The Northern CWAP (Border Rivers, Gwydir, Namoi, Peel and Macquarie valleys) held a meeting on 29 July 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 at: www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/drought-update/critical-water-advisory-panels

Information on the drought status of major river systems across the state can be found at: www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/drought-update/critical-valleys-in-drought

Please note: All reasonable efforts have been made to provide accurate and current information in this communique. This information is accurate as at 29 July 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 and are available at: www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/allocations/statements

Water availability update and forecast

CWAP members were provided with an update on northern river system conditions as at 29 July. Further inflows have occurred since this update due to additional rainfall. More up-to-date information can be accessed on the WaterNSW website. WaterNSW publishes weekly water availability update reports at: www.waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/availability.

The WaterNSW Water Insights Portal is also a useful resource for stakeholders wanting to access more information on storage levels, allocations and any restrictions. The portal brings together a range of water management data into one platform: www.waternsw.com.au/waterinsights/water-insights.

29 July update

Minimum releases are occurring from all northern system storages and most of the water coming into storages from recent rainfall is being stored.

Border Rivers

There have been some small tributary inflows as a result of rain in the last few days (prior to 29 July), which may be large enough to trigger supplementary access according to water sharing plan rules. There is a continuation of flow along the whole river and small inflows to Pindari Dam.

Gwydir

There are small flows in downstream tributaries and there has been a small rise in the Horton River. Less than 200megalitres (ML)/day has been passed onto the Gingham and Gwydir wetlands. Some water north of the tributaries is going down the Mehi River (20-30ML/day) and there are some inflows to Copeton Dam.

Namoi

Most rain has been in the eastern part of the catchment. There have only been small inflows to Split Rock Dam over the last few days (approximately 100ML). Some flows are coming down the Macdonald River into Keepit Dam. There are also tributary flows in the Peel Valley and good flows from Dungowan downstream.

On 29 July, Chaffey Dam was at 20.6% and rising. At this time, conditions had improved enough to stop using the Dungowan to Tamworth pipeline and Tamworth Council is accessing water from run of the river flows in the Peel and some water from Dungowan Dam.

1 July allocations for 2020-21 water year

Overall, river systems across the state have moved out of the critical water conditions experienced during the peak of the drought. Most high priority licences received full or near-full allocations on 1 July, but there has been very little improvement in general security allocations. Most restrictions put in place during the height of the drought to protect water for critical needs have been eased. There has been some improvement across most valleys since 1 July due to recent rainfall.

On 1 July, all general security licence holders received zero allocations except for Border Rivers A class (7.3%), Murrumbidgee (10%) and Lower Darling (30%). Further water needs to be captured into storages to allocate more water to general security licences.

In the Macquarie, restrictions on general security account water were reduced on 1 July. General security licence holders are now able to access 40% of their account balance.

In the Peel, town water supply received 70% allocation, high security 50% and general security 0% on 1 July. There have been some inflows into Chaffey Dam since 1 July. The Peel is still in Stage 4 Drought – the most critical valley in the state.

No water is being released from Keepit Dam – river is being supplied from tributary inflows.

All unregulated systems received full allocations on 1 July, except for three Macquarie Unregulated River zones upstream of Bathurst. Licence holders in these zones have been restricted to 20% of normal access to protect Bathurst's water supply.

On 1 July, all groundwater sources received full allocations, except for three sources where the long-term extraction limits have been exceeded:

- Great Artesian Eastern Recharge water source
- Lower Murrumbidgee Deep water source
- Upper Namoi Zone 3 water source.

Allocations were also reduced in alluvial water sources connected to impacted surface water sources.

Water allocation statements have been released since 1 July in the south of state, providing some minor improvements to general security allocations. The next water allocation statements for the central and northern valleys will be released in early August.

The Bureau of Meteorology is forecasting wetter conditions over winter and spring.

Water allocation statements can be found on the DPIE-Water website:

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

A summary of current allocations and a valley-by-valley comparison of dam storage levels and opening allocations for 1 July 2019 and 2020 can be found at:

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

Northern valleys drought webinar

The Northern valleys drought information webinar was held on 28 May. Eighty-six stakeholders participated in the live session.

Issues raised by stakeholders during the webinar included:

- The 'drought of record' used within water sharing plans
- The condition of groundwater systems in the Upper Namoi
- How water is managed around Walgett – including water quality and security
- Carryover in the Namoi
- 1 July allocations
- Groundwater level declines in the Dubbo area
- PFAS issues around Dubbo – Dubbo Regional Council's media release on this issue is available on their website: www.dubbo.nsw.gov.au/news-and-media/news-and-resources/media-releases/2020/pfas-testing-results-prompt-detailed-investigation
- Floodplain harvesting in the Macquarie
- Water for firefighting purposes.

The webinar recording, presentation slides and a 'What we heard' summary are now available on the DPIE-Water website: www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/drought-update/information-sessions

Update – Northern Basin First Flush Assessment

Following the Northern Basin First Flush event in January- April 2020, the Minister for Water, Property and Housing, the Hon. Melinda Pavey MP, announced the establishment of an Independent Panel to undertake an assessment of how the event was managed.

The Panel's draft report is currently on public exhibition until 9 August. The draft report makes ten recommendations, with a strong focus on improving communication and transparency. The final report is expected by 7 September 2020. DPIE-Water will respond to the draft recommendations.

This was the first time a restriction event of this size has been implemented and the first time restrictions have been placed on floodplain harvesting. DPIE-Water will take the lessons learnt from this event to improve any future event management.

The department has recently released a report on 'Assessment of take and protection of first flush' This can be found at: www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/drought-update/managing-drought-recovery/north-west-flows-in-early-2020

The Panel's draft report and information on how to make a submission is available on the DPIE-Water website at: www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/northern-basin-first-flush-assessment

Update – Regional Water Strategies

DPIE-Water is preparing 12 regional water strategies covering the whole state. These long-term strategies look at requirements over the next few decades based on detailed climate modelling and paleo-data.

Work is focused on delivering the three strategies identified as priorities in the State Infrastructure Strategy – the Lachlan, Gwydir and Macquarie. Once they are released, the draft reports will be placed on public exhibition for six weeks and there will be multiple avenues for stakeholders to have their say.

There will also be ongoing conversations throughout the development of the strategies post-exhibition. Depending on the timing of the public exhibition release, DPIE-Water is aiming to finalise all regional water strategies by the end of this year or the start of next year.

The Border Rivers and Namoi (includes Peel) strategies are currently under development. DPIE-Water is consulting with local councils and representatives from various NSW Government departments. DPIE-Water has not been able to consult with Aboriginal communities due to COVID-19. Aboriginal peak bodies have expressed a preference for face-to-face engagement. DPIE-Water is working through options in consultation with peak bodies on how to engage with Aboriginal groups safely given ongoing concerns over COVID-19.

Chaffey to Dungowan pipeline authorisation and environmental releases

To conserve water for Tamworth the NSW Government funded the construction of a pipeline direct from Chaffey Dam to Dungowan. Normally, water is released for Tamworth from Chaffey Dam into the Peel River and the water is then pumped from Tamworth's offtake downstream. The pipeline allows water to be piped directly from the dam to Dungowan, thus reducing the high losses that occur with river releases during dry periods. Under the Chaffey to Dungowan pipeline authorisation, the pipeline is operational when Chaffey Dam is below 20% capacity.

The pipeline began operation on 17 June and has just ceased operations owing to recent rain-driven flows (28 July). Under the terms of the authorisation, when Chaffey Dam is between 10% and 20% capacity water is accrued into an Environmental Water Account, and a Peel Technical Water Advisory Group led by DPIE-EES has been established to advise on the release of this water. The Peel River provides habitat for platypus and threatened fish species including the threatened freshwater catfish, purple-spotted gudgeon, Murray Cod and potentially silver perch.

The phases and environmental rules under the authorisation are:

Phase	Falling storage	Rising storage	Environmental requirements
1	20% & above	20% & above	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Pipeline ceases to operate and normal 3ML/day environmental release as per the water sharing plan applies
2	15-19.9%	Does not apply	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Water is accrued in an environmental account of 3ML/day up to a maximum of 1,095 ML/year

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The PEWTAG can order WaterNSW to release flows from this account Emergency releases can be authorised by DPIE Water
3	10-14.9%	15-19.9%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water is accrued in an environmental account at the rate of 1.5 ML/day up to a maximum of 550 ML/year The PEWTAG can order WaterNSW to release flows from this account Emergency releases can be authorised by DPIE Water
4	Below 10%	Below 15%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No water is accrued for release Emergency releases can be authorised by DPIE Water

On 29 July, WaterNSW was requested to release the 62ML of environmental water accrued since the commencement of the pipeline authorisation. The river was still dry for some 7.5 kilometres downstream of Chaffey Dam to Woolomin, with isolated pools. The objective of the releases was to restart the river, provide connection between pools and allow movement of native fish. The 62ML was released over 4 days starting 29 July and then the 3ML/day environmental flow rule recommenced on 2 August.

Agencies present

- NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment
 - Water Division (DPIE-Water)
- WaterNSW
- NSW Department of Primary Industries
 - DPI Agriculture
 - DPI Fisheries
- NSW Health
- NSW EPA
- Central Joint Organisation of Councils
- Orana Water Utilities Alliance