

Lower Darling Critical Water Advisory Panel (CWAP)

A subset of the Barwon Darling/Lower Darling CWAP convened on 13 March 2020 to discuss the recommencement of flows to the Lower Darling.

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](#).

The Lower Darling is currently in Drought Stage 3 – Severe Drought according to the NSW Extreme Events Policy.

Forecast flows to reach Menindee Lakes

The first flows from widespread rainfall over north-west NSW and southern Queensland during January/February started arriving at Menindee Lakes (Lake Wetherell) on 10 March. Flows are expected to continue into Lake Wetherell over coming months.

WaterNSW is constantly monitoring flows and is providing regular operations updates on their website - www.watarnsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates

At the time of the meeting:

- flow rates into Lake Wetherell were 10 gigalitres (GL)/day.
- it was estimated that a total volume of 250-305GL would reach Menindee Lakes as a result of the current flow event. As of 16 March, this has been revised to 260-315GL.
- over 220GL had flowed through Bourke, with a total of 350GL expected.
- smaller flows of 20-40GL were also expected to flow downstream of Bourke from inflows from the Warrego River.

Protection of flows

The Critical Water Advisory Panel was given an overview of how flows were protected across northern Basin catchments and along the Barwon Darling system.

When flows were anticipated from widespread rain in north-west NSW and southern Queensland, temporary water restrictions were put in place across NSW northern Basin catchments to protect water for critical needs (town water supply, basic landholder rights, high security and environmental needs) following the extended dry period.

A range of in-valley flow targets, including along the Barwon Darling system, were developed to allow the NSW Department of Planning, Infrastructure and Environment (DPIE) to assess when critical needs would be met. Critical environmental needs were determined based on minimum flow recommendations in [Long Term Water Plans](#).

Observed and forecast flows were assessed against these flow targets. In situations where in-valley targets could be met but were not large enough to contribute to further downstream targets, consideration was given to lifting local restrictions. If flows could contribute to downstream targets, restrictions were kept in place.

Once critical needs were met, restrictions were progressively lifted. All northern tributary restrictions were lifted by late February. From 29 February, river access was permitted in the Barwon Darling above the Culgoa Junction only. Access was granted downstream of the Culgoa Junction on 6 March.

A restriction still remains in place for floodplain harvesting access on the Barwon Darling floodplain. This is being assessed regularly.

Further information on the temporary restrictions and reasoning behind the lifting of restrictions is available on the DPIE-Water website - www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/temporary-water-restrictions

Restarting flows to the Lower Darling

The flows expected at Menindee Lakes will be enough to maintain supply to Lower Darling landholders for the next 12-18 months.

As a result, the CWAP endorsed the department's proposal to remove the four temporary block banks currently in place between Pooncarie and Wentworth. These block banks were installed between August 2018 and the start of 2019 to maintain supply for permanent plantings and stock and domestic use.

The removal of these block banks will allow the Lower Darling to flow all the way down to Wentworth on the Murray when releases from Menindee Lakes are restarted.

The timing and volume of releases from Menindee Lakes is still being finalised. While the NSW Government is working to restart flows as soon as possible, releases need to be designed so that flows are maintained along the river for as long as possible and water quality impacts are minimised. Poor water quality can impact on both water users and the environment, including native fish populations that remain in refuge pools along the river.

Independent assessment of the Northern 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; and
- regulatory, planning or policy instruments.

The department welcomes the inquiry and looks forward to receiving the final report, which is expected by August 2020.

Monitoring flows and impacts

Unfortunately, the first flush of water has carried a lot of debris and salt with it from upstream systems and from within the Barwon Darling itself. While water quality is improving behind the initial flush of water and should continue to improve quickly as more water arrives to dilute it, fish kills have been reported in several locations along the Barwon Darling, including at the top of Lake Wetherell.

More information on how the NSW Government is responding to the heightened risk of fish kills during the current drought can be found on the DPI website -

www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/habitat/threats/fish-kills

The NSW Government will be monitoring river conditions as flows recommence. The results of this monitoring will assist adaptive decision making as flows continue and provide valuable data to inform the future management of the Barwon Darling system.

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
- NSW Environment Protection Authority
- NSW Health
- Wentworth Shire Council
- Far South West Joint Organisation of Councils

Next meeting

Meetings will be held once a week for the next few weeks to discuss the details of restarting flows. Another meeting was held on 20 March. The outcomes of each meeting will be published separately.