

Community update on response to fish deaths in Menindee and Lower Darling

Current situation

We have heard local community concern about a small number of dead fish seen recently in the Darling River.

The risk of further large-scale fish deaths is still a possibility. This is particularly the case for Bony Herring in the river reach between Lake Pamamaroo and Weir 32, which boomed during the recent floods and many may now be in poor condition and more susceptible to environmental stresses.

In good news, our water quality monitoring is showing continued improvement in dissolved oxygen levels in the Darling River at Menindee. In addition to the release of oxygenated water from lakes Pamamaroo and Menindee, the cooler water temperatures as air temperatures fell have seen dissolved oxygen levels recover. These circumstances are all helpful to the survival of fish.

However, blue-green algae is now starting to cause some concern as blooms, of varying severity, are being detected in the Menindee Lakes and the lower Darling River. Red Alerts are currently in place for the Darling River at Pooncarie, Burtundy, Tolarno and Talyawalka Creek at Menindee-Pooncarie Road Crossing.

Algal blooms persist within the Weir 32 weir pool. Lake Wetherell and some of the small upstream lakes also have higher concentrations of algae. The larger lakes - Pamamaroo and Menindee - do not have large algae blooms present, but algae has been detected.

What is being done?

Increased flows to support Murray cod nesting will be brought forward a couple of weeks to commence from 19 August. These annual increased flows are usually released from Lake Menindee, but at this time they will be released from Lake Pamamaroo. This is being done to have the dual impact of supporting Murray Cod breeding further downstream while also ensuring dissolved oxygen levels are maintained in the river each between Lake Pamamaroo and Weir 32. The flows will have the added benefit of helping to combat the increased algal blooms and associated water quality issues in the lower Darling River.

To assist with flushing algae and improve water quality, a larger pulse flow over a period of four days will be delivered from Lake Pamamaroo, scaling back to slightly higher flows from Pamamaroo outlet than are currently being delivered.

At present, these flows from Lake Pamamaroo are planned to continue until early December, but we will continue to monitor, and make adjustments based on water quality information, and the need to balance that with conserving water in the top lakes.

To report any further incidents of dead fish, fish struggling or starting to gasp at the water surface, or crayfish exiting the water, please call the NSW Department of Primary Industries Fisheries' Fishers Watch Phonenumber 1800 043 536 or fill in a fish kill protocol and report form at: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/habitat/threats/fish-kills-2019-2020/info-sheet

How will the Lakes and water quality be managed during the coming summer?

Balancing fish health with the need to conserve water in the top lakes at Menindee as we move into summer, coupled with the potential for severe dry weather as a result of the now confirmed El Nino event, is the situation we need to address.

We know there is still a large number of fish, predominantly Bony Herring and Carp, between Pamamaroo outlet and Weir 32.

If we continue to release water from Lake Pamamaroo, we face the possibility of bringing forward the drought management procedures for Menindee Lakes earlier than would be expected under the current conditions.

If we cease flows from Lake Pamamaroo, we face the possibility of more fish deaths as the weather gets hotter.

There is also the real possibility that even with water continuing to be released from Lake Pamamaroo that fish deaths will occur as food resources are depleted in this stretch of the river.

It is evident there is no easy answer as to how this situation can be managed.

What happens next?

The department, together with the multiple State and Commonwealth agencies that are managing the current situation, plan on seeking input from Menindee community and interested groups.

It is intended that representatives for all involved agencies will be visiting Menindee in the coming weeks to outline the problems being faced and talk about what can be done.

Where else can I find information?

Information about the monitoring, management and maintenance of water quality, including detailed community updates from the Department of Planning and Environment, is available online: www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/drought-update/managing-drought-recovery/blackwater

water.dpie.nsw.gov.au/menindee/community-updates-and-frequently-asked-questions

Observations of changes to water, including struggling fish or deaths can be reported directly to DPI Fisheries on 1800 043 536.

For more information about fish kills, as well as recent reports of observations and causes, visit: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/habitat/threats/fish-kills

These types of events can be distressing to members of the community, and anyone who requires health, welfare or other support can contact local community support services. A comprehensive list of services can be located online: www.service.nsw.gov.au/transaction/customer-support-service-infoxchange-service-seeker