

# Draft Western Regional Water Strategy

Attachment C: What we heard through  
targeted stakeholder engagement

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**Cover image** Image courtesy of Destination NSW. Menindee Lakes, Menindee.

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# Overview

Development of the regional water strategies is supported by a thorough engagement program. The purpose of this engagement is to inform, gain information and feedback, collaborate with key stakeholders on strategy development and build support for each regional water strategy.

Development of the Western Regional Water Strategy is supported by 4 engagement phases:

1. **targeted engagement** with councils, local water utilities, joint organisations and Aboriginal people, as well as targeted stakeholder groups through the Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group
2. **a public exhibition process** to seek feedback on the Draft Western Regional Water Strategy and accompanying long list of options
3. **further targeted engagement** with stakeholders if needed before finalising the strategy
4. **public release** of final Western Regional Water Strategy.

Most targeted engagement activities for the Western Regional Water Strategy were undertaken in partnership with the Western Weirs Program, WaterNSW and Water Infrastructure NSW to coordinate the provision of water project information to Western region stakeholders and give a clear understanding of how future water projects and options align and interact.

An interagency panel was formed to assist in the development of the Draft Western Regional Water Strategy. This panel, chaired by the Department of Planning and Environment – Water, included representatives from across the Department of Planning and Environment cluster including Environment and Heritage, Planning, Office of Local Government and Strategy and Reform.

Members of the panel also included representatives from the Department of Regional NSW, including Local Land Services, the Office of Local Government and the Fisheries and Agriculture sections of the Department of Primary Industries. WaterNSW was also represented.

This report documents targeted stakeholder feedback during engagement phase 1 of the development of the Western Regional Water Strategy.

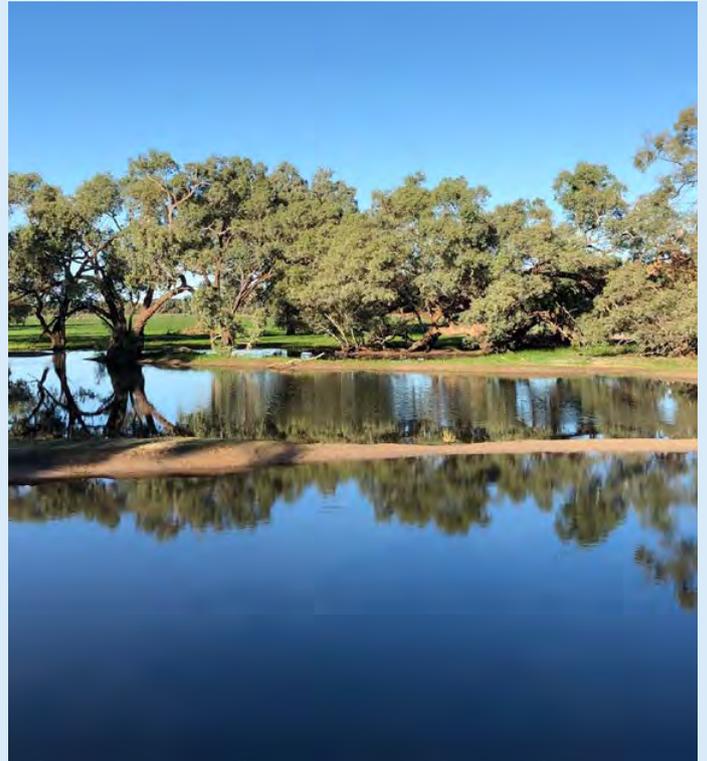


Image courtesy of Department of Planning and Environment – Environment and Heritage. Western floodplain, Toorale.

# Engagement

Discussions commenced with councils and local water utilities in June 2020, with all meetings held online. Representatives from the Office of Local Government and Regional Development Australia also participated in some meetings. The purpose of these discussions was to establish a collaborative relationship with local councils and local water utilities (LWUs), as well as to gain an understanding of key water challenges and risks in the Western region. Discussions also focused on the results of modelling undertaken to support the regional water strategies and on gaining feedback on the draft long list of options for the Western Regional Water Strategy.

Discussions commenced with Aboriginal communities in March 2021 and were held in community facilities in rural towns across the region. A coordinated engagement program to discuss key Western region water projects was undertaken in collaboration with the Western Weirs Program and Water Infrastructure NSW projects.

A second round of Aboriginal stakeholder workshops were held on the strategy in February and March 2022 at Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke, Wilcannia, Menindee and Wentworth.

This approach provided an opportunity for Aboriginal communities to provide their local knowledge and input to a range of water projects at the one time. Each information session was independently facilitated and commenced with a yarning circle. There was additional time for people to discuss specific water project details with departmental staff and visit local cultural sites.

The Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group was established in late 2021 to provide diverse perspectives to the Department of Planning and Environment on the proposed approach to river connectivity ahead of broader public consultation on connectivity as part of the Draft Western Regional Water Strategy. The group consists of representatives from Aboriginal nations, water user groups, conservation groups, local government, the Murray–Darling Basin Authority and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office. Three meetings were held on 25 August, 7 October and 29 November 2021. Further information on the information presented and the communiques from each meeting can be found at [www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/what-we-do/stakeholder-engagement/connectivity](http://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/what-we-do/stakeholder-engagement/connectivity)

The following organisations or communities participated in discussions.



Image courtesy of Wentworth Shire Council. Lower Darling River at Wentworth.

Local council/local water utility	Aboriginal community	Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group
Balranald Shire Council	Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN)	Bourke Shire Council
Bourke Shire Council	Aboriginal Affairs	Barwon–Darling Water
Broken Hill City Council	Maranguka Community Hub	NSW Irrigators Council
Central Darling Shire Council	Brewarrina Local Aboriginal Land Council	Gomeroi Water Group
Moree Plains Shire Council	Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN)	Ngemba, Ngiyampaa, Wangaaypuwan and Wayilwan Native Title group
Cobar Shire Council	Barkandji River Ranger Program	Nature Conservation Council
Walgett Shire Council	Baaka Water Commission	Murray Regional Strategy Group
Wentworth Shire Council	Dharriwaa Elders Group	Local Government NSW
Far West Joint Organisation of Councils	Walgett Local Aboriginal Land Council	Australian Floodplain Association
Far North West Joint Organisation of Councils	National Indigenous Australia Agency	Menindee Stakeholder Advisory Group
Essential Water	Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council	NSW Aboriginal Land Council
	Regional Enterprise Development Institute	Gomeroi Water Group
	Western Local Health District/Local Land Services/Victoria Fisheries	Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists
	Mungindi Local Aboriginal Land Council	Inland Rivers Network
	Community Working Party	NSW Aboriginal Land Council
	Barkandji Native Title Group	South West Water Users
	Traditional owners and community members	Brewarrina Shire Council
		Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA)
		Commonwealth Environmental Water Office
		Barkandji Native Title Group

# Engagement summary

## Quick stats, recurring themes and hot topics

A total of 13 meetings have been held so far, with 113 people external to the Department of Planning and Environment attending and participating in discussions during the targeted engagement phase. Information about participants and a summary of recurring themes and hot topics are outlined below.

Targeted council and LWU engagement	Targeted Aboriginal engagement	Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Panel
<b>Quick stats</b>	<b>Quick stats</b>	<b>Quick stats</b>
4 targeted meetings.	17 targeted meetings.	3 targeted meetings and an additional 3 Aboriginal member meetings.
24 people participated in discussions.	121 people participated in discussions.	Around 20 stakeholders participated in each meeting.
Meetings held via video conference and telephone due to COVID-19.	Meetings held in community facilities in rural towns across the region.	Meetings held via video conference and telephone due to COVID-19.
Over 300 ideas, opportunities and challenges and suggestions identified at meetings.	Over 500 ideas, opportunities and challenges and suggestions identified at meetings.	Over 200 written and verbal comments received during the meetings and through submissions.

Targeted council and LWU engagement	Targeted Aboriginal engagement	Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Panel
<b>Recurring themes</b>	<b>Recurring themes</b>	<b>Recurring themes</b>
There is a diversity of water management arrangements that operate across the Western region.	Cultural connection to water in all aspects of life.	There needs to be more information on whether the entire length of the river stopped flowing pre-1940s and how other flows have changed over time.
Challenges in water management associated with vast distances, adequate resources and water knowledge expertise.	Importance of authentic and culturally appropriate engagement that ensures enough time for people to consider and participate in discussions.	<p>Section 324 (s324) orders are not desirable, and water sharing plan rules that have been negotiated through community processes are a better option.</p> <p>The triggers need to be applied fairly, and there needs to be clearly defined rules about when restrictions will be implemented and lifted.</p> <p>There needs to be more data collection, real time water monitoring and information about how often the draft triggers for restrictions would likely be met.</p>
Suitability of water management solutions for a western NSW climate.	Overwhelming desire for the river to look after all people along its full length.	Aboriginal knowledge, written and photographic evidence should be used to support government data.
Water security continues to be a priority and increasingly groundwater is considered an important part of the overall water source mix.	Want to participate in new economic opportunities associated with water management.	Detailed discussions about the s324 and North-West Flow Plan options along with the proposed connectivity options that will be in the Draft Western Regional Water Strategy.

Targeted council and LWU engagement	Targeted Aboriginal engagement	Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Panel
<b>Hot topics</b>	<b>Hot topics</b>	<b>Hot Topics</b>
Variability of water quality and challenges associated with water treatment.	Equity in water management including involvement in water planning and access to water.	Whether the Barwon–Darling River has stopped flowing over the historical record.
Water management arrangements for Menindee Lakes to achieve sustainable outcomes.	Cultural authority of Aboriginal peak groups and challenges of inclusive representation.	A clear need for the government to improve connectivity across the Northern Basin through the use of targets.
System-wide connectivity to meet the water needs of stakeholders upstream and downstream.	Self-determination in water management.	The government should not be only looking at connectivity during low and cease-to-flow periods and should be trying to improve connectivity for a range of flow classes.
Challenges exist in providing water infrastructure to remote communities.	Declining water quality is affecting cultural activities at the river.	A lack of support for regulating the Barwon–Darling River.



Image courtesy of Michael Scotland. Lower Darling River, Wentworth.

# Detailed feedback

The following table summarises feedback from the targeted engagement phase.

## Council engagement

Topic	Comment
<b>Development of the Western Regional Water Strategy, including evidence and stakeholder engagement</b>	<p>Stakeholders support the development of the Western Regional Water Strategy and want to make sure that it aligns with other water projects and includes broad stakeholder involvement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expressed a need for a balanced and staged approach focusing on both the technical aspects of water management and the social and cultural aspects of water</li><li>• Expressed appreciation for the provisions of water management information and for the coordinated update provided on water projects</li><li>• Supported the use of climate risk information and stated that the Western Regional Water Strategy should clearly show that the results are modelled on the worst-case climate scenario</li><li>• Stated that the region is experiencing more climate volatility and higher rainfall variability</li><li>• Sought clarity on the engagement process and timing of engagement events considering COVID-19 and expressed a desire for ongoing involvement in the development of the strategy</li><li>• Stated that some stakeholders attend many meetings and that engagement fatigue is an issue</li><li>• Stressed the importance of linking in with other water initiatives such as the Western Weirs Program and aligning water planning processes</li><li>• Sought clarity on the legislative relationship between regional water strategies and water sharing plans</li><li>• Stressed the importance of involving broad stakeholders including government, cultural groups, elected representatives, river communities and cross-border representatives</li><li>• Expressed an interest in being kept informed of the strategy process, as well as the development of other regional water strategies bordering the Western region.</li></ul>

Topic	Comment
<b>Water management</b>	<p>Stakeholders outlined a range of water management issues covering remoteness, the size of some communities, access to water and available infrastructure, knowledge and expertise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggested that a range of strategies and options is needed to respond to the different uses of water and stressed the importance of exploring multiple water management and infrastructure options, including options to pipe water from other water sources</li> <li>• Stated that water supply issues exist in remote communities due to the vast distances between water storages and that trucking water for long periods is not sustainable</li> <li>• Stated that smaller councils struggle to maintain staff with the expertise to manage water treatment processes and suggest there is a need for further training to support sustainable operations</li> <li>• Stated that a mix of groundwater, river and overland flows, water storage options and water carting is used to maintain water availability, with some councils noting that it is a challenge to supply enough water to some towns and villages</li> <li>• Suggested that the community’s knowledge of water management of the Menindee Lakes should be considered</li> <li>• Stated that funding for infrastructure projects is complex and it is a challenge for water providers to fund some pipeline options</li> <li>• Stated that hydropanel options are not effective or suitable for the environment in the Western region and communities have complained about the noise they generate</li> <li>• Expressed concern with government policies regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– water management of the Menindee Lakes</li> <li>– Murray–Darling Basin Plan arrangements</li> <li>– the ‘monetisation’ of water.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Suggested that water regulation should be ‘tightened’ and licensing be more transparent</li> <li>• Expressed concern regarding water licence classes, pump sizes and the speed of water extraction</li> <li>• Suggested that environmental flows can be better managed to provide for cultural needs</li> <li>• Expressed concern that floodplain harvesting is having an impact on flows in the Lower Darling River</li> <li>• Suggested that Menindee Lakes should be listed as a RAMSAR site.</li> </ul>
<b>Water security and regional development</b>	<p>Stakeholders noted that water security was important for the economic survival of towns and want to make it easier for people to spend time in the Western region:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stated that the focus on water security needs to be maintained even though parts of the region are no longer in drought</li> <li>• Expressed a desire to work with the department to identify increasing demand for water and overall capacity to meet this demand</li> <li>• Suggested that all options for water security should be considered, as some towns almost ran out of water during the last drought</li> </ul>

Topic	Comment
<b>Water security and regional development (continued)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressed mixed views on the suitability of alternative water sources; some communities cannot afford to operate and maintain recycled and desalinated water schemes; other councils are using recycled water on gardens and recreation areas to reduce demand on potable water</li> <li>• Stressed the significance of industries such as mining and agriculture for the region and noted that having adequate supply to support industry needs also supports the community</li> <li>• Stated that having water in the river is not only important for water security but also for people’s wellbeing, indicating that ‘people are happier’ when the rivers are flowing</li> <li>• Stressed the importance of recreational fishing for both cultural purposes and for tourism</li> <li>• Stated that the amenity of Menindee Lakes is the biggest concern for residents in Menindee and Broken Hill.</li> </ul>
<b>Water quality</b>	<p>Stakeholders have concerns with the variability in water quality across the Western region:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stated that water management systems and processes need to be regularly adjusted to manage changes in water quality</li> <li>• Identified a range of water quality management challenges: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– water filtration challenges due to river turbidity</li> <li>– high salinity levels requiring harder water treatment processes</li> <li>– variability in water nutrient loads, weir levels and weather conditions increase the likelihood of blue-green algal blooms.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Stated that the headwaters of first flush events have high salinity levels and turbidity</li> <li>• Stated that some councils ‘shandy’ (mix together) weir pool water with bore water due to turbidity and water quality issues</li> <li>• Suggested that water quality requirements should vary according to the different water uses, noting that requirements and management strategies for drinking water are different to other water uses.</li> </ul>
<b>Connectivity</b>	<p>Stakeholders stressed the importance of a system-wide connection of water across the Western region:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indicated that the term ‘improving connectivity’ is misleading and suggested that this needs to be clarified</li> <li>• Stressed the need to amend water sharing plans to provide for downstream connectivity</li> <li>• Stated that connectivity between the northern and southern parts of the region and into the Murray River is very important</li> <li>• Suggested that trigger points are needed to ensure connectivity can be managed between water systems.</li> </ul>

Topic	Comment
<b>Western Weirs and off-stream storages</b>	<p>Stakeholders are supportive of the Western Weirs Program being developed by Water Infrastructure NSW and stressed the importance of off-stream storages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sought to understand timing and funding arrangements for the Western Weirs Program and would like to see more information on options</li> <li>• Expressed a range of views on off-stream storages, including raising or moving weir pools in some locations and proposing new weir pools for other locations</li> <li>• Stated that weirs provide increased water reliability and note that some communities have expressed support for off-stream storages</li> <li>• Expressed concern for the longevity of off-stream storages in dry periods</li> <li>• Expressed concern that raising some weirs will impact on associated infrastructure such as boat ramps and car parks.</li> </ul>
<b>Groundwater</b>	<p>Stakeholders across the region vary in their reliance on groundwater but all stressed the importance of this water source for water security:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stated that groundwater is increasingly being used as a contingency plan to ‘drought proof’ communities, and some communities are likely to become more reliant on groundwater in the future</li> <li>• Indicated a preference for river water, particularly for towns located on rivers</li> <li>• Expressed a desire for more information on aquifer recharge, its relationship to surface water and potential impacts from floodplain harvesting to better manage aquifer use</li> <li>• Stated that new mining development could be expected in some parts of the region and indicated processes are required to manage mining development on groundwater</li> <li>• Most groundwater needs to be treated to meet drinking water standards and some water authorities use desalination plants to manage water quality and taste issues</li> <li>• Sought further information on research into the environmental effects of groundwater extraction and managed aquifer recharge.</li> </ul>

# Aboriginal engagement

Topic	Comment
<p><b>Development of the Western Regional Water Strategy</b></p>	<p>Stakeholders want to ensure the Western Regional Water Strategy is holistic by considering rivers and valleys together, and want to participate in water planning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stressed the importance of connectivity and encouraged discussions on the whole water system, indicating that ‘regions’ are arbitrary concepts</li> <li>• Expressed concern that the strategy is ‘another draft plan’ and want action on the ‘real issues’</li> <li>• Expressed concern that Aboriginal people haven’t been given the opportunity to ‘look after’ water and want greater transparency</li> <li>• Stressed the importance of including water rights in Native Title claims</li> <li>• Requested further information on the relationship between the Western Regional Water Strategy, water sharing plans and the NSW Water Strategy</li> <li>• Expressed concern that a 20-year strategy horizon is too long as the river system needs action now</li> <li>• Stated the Australian Bureau of Statistics population census is not a good measure of the true population of Aboriginal people and this should be considered as part of developing the strategy</li> <li>• Stated that community wellbeing should be a priority in the strategy</li> <li>• Expressed concern that the Water Management Act doesn’t emphasise the significance of cultural water in the same way that economic uses of water are emphasised</li> <li>• Suggested that a committee of Aboriginal people could help influence decisions about water use and management of the rivers</li> <li>• Suggested the strategy look at increasing critical human use allocations by limiting extraction from water storages, as well as decreasing water extraction pump sizes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cultural heritage and water knowledge</b></p>	<p>As custodians of the land, stakeholders described their connection to water and want cultural knowledge shared in a culturally sensitive way:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stressed that water is for everyone and that ownership over water is ‘white fella mentality’ and reflects a lack of cultural awareness</li> <li>• Stated that Aboriginal Water Lore requires water to be looked after for people that live downstream</li> <li>• Stressed the connection to water, stating that the river is healing, unifying, provides identity and continues culture – it was stated that water is ‘our lifeblood’</li> <li>• Described how cultural practises interlink water and land management and can help in managing feral animals</li> <li>• Stated that most land along the river is ‘women’s areas’ and that Elder women have guided the mapping of Country from Pooncarie to Menindee – it was noted that some Elders involved in this work are no longer here and stressed the need to consult Traditional Owners on sharing cultural knowledge</li> <li>• Stated that traditional names are First Nations intellectual property and permission to use traditional names is needed</li> <li>• Explained the importance of sharing knowledge and expressed concern that Aboriginal history and culture are not taught in schools</li> </ul>

Topic	Comment
<b>Cultural heritage and water knowledge (continued)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stressed the importance of water in maintaining traditional foods, including medicinal plants</li> <li>• Stated that when there is no water in the river, cultural knowledge cannot be shared with future generations</li> <li>• Stated there used to be more fish in the river including Murray Cod, Yellow Belly and Catfish, now there is only Carp</li> <li>• Stressed the importance of protecting significant Aboriginal sites along the river and expressed concern that mining companies are digging up sacred sites</li> <li>• Suggested that mapping culturally significant sites is needed.</li> </ul>
<b>Engagement and communication</b>	<p>Stakeholders value meaningful and culturally appropriate discussion on water management and want their issues and ideas to be heard and included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stressed the importance of appropriate representation, indicating that not all Aboriginal people have cultural authority to speak</li> <li>• Expressed concern that environmental and social concerns are not represented, while the views of ‘bigger customers’ have a strong voice in decision making</li> <li>• Stated that all Aboriginal people have something to say</li> <li>• Stated that timelines for consultation are not long enough and more time is needed to spend on Country</li> <li>• Suggested that water leaders from within the community would add value to consultation outcomes including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– provide a regional voice for water</li> <li>– speak with cultural authority</li> <li>– co-ordinate various government agency consultations</li> <li>– bring different networks and agencies together.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Expressed mixed views on the role and support provided by the Northern Basin Aboriginal Network (NBAN), with some suggesting NBAN provides an important advocacy role while others concerned that NBAN is not representative</li> <li>• Expressed the importance of consultation information and suggested that culturally appropriate resources could help Aboriginal people participate more fully</li> <li>• Expressed frustration and exhaustion that community members have shared their views with government many times and feel they are not being listened to</li> <li>• Expressed a desire for action by the department to show they have heard what Aboriginal/First Nations people have said</li> <li>• Stated there is a lack of trust about how information provided by community is to be used</li> <li>• Stated that it is important that consultation sessions are not a waste of time and want ongoing feedback on water projects so that it is clear what is happening on the ground</li> <li>• Suggested that it is better to ‘have a yarn’ by the river than in a meeting room.</li> </ul>

Topic	Comment
<b>Employment and economic opportunities</b>	<p>Stakeholders expressed a desire for more water-related jobs and training opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stressed the need to consider opportunities for future industries in river towns so that the community can have jobs into the future</li> <li>• Stated that employment is the biggest issue and future water plans and water projects need to include options for more employment of Aboriginal people</li> <li>• Stated that tourism in the Menindee region is impacted when there isn't any water in the lakes</li> <li>• Expressed the need for more training in farm management practices and stated that past shared farm arrangements were not successful</li> <li>• Stated that they want support to develop a farming business on land they own</li> <li>• Stressed that a key priority is employment for young people.</li> </ul>
<b>Healthy environment and community wellbeing</b>	<p>Stakeholders are concerned about the health of the river environment, and outlined its importance for community wellbeing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressed concern that river flows are not healthy and operate to meet the needs of irrigators and those that want to make a profit</li> <li>• Stated that the river has changed, indicating that there used to be plenty of water for everyone</li> <li>• Expressed concern that the river will go completely dry and that there will be no coming back</li> <li>• Expressed concern that land is being cleared and there is a loss of natural ecosystems, native animals and totems</li> <li>• Stated that bank erosion and bank slumping are issues and are concerned that decreased flooding events is causing environmental damage</li> <li>• Stated that the river is for health, the river is for healing</li> <li>• Stated that a flowing river is important for recreation such as fishing and swimming and important for social wellbeing</li> <li>• Stressed that environmental embargoes are extremely important to improve river health and to protect the river for the future.</li> </ul>
<b>Water management</b>	<p>Stakeholders were frustrated with water management arrangements and want to be considered as equal partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressed concern that the community have lost access to parts of the river and some weirs because of land ownership arrangements and this impacts on cultural practices</li> <li>• Provided a number of comments relating to the Brewarrina Weir and fish traps: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the fish traps are culturally significant and water should be allocated to ensure a consistent flow</li> <li>– in the past the fish traps always held water</li> <li>– before the weir, the fish traps acted as a weir and the town never ran out of water.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Expressed major concerns about water use upstream and stated that irrigation and on-farm water storages take too much water</li> </ul>

Topic	Comment
<b>Water management (continued)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressed strong concern that the river system has been destroyed in a short time and that the approach should now be a ‘whole of river’ management strategy rather than by region because of the rapid destruction</li> <li>• Strongly stressed the need for an equal approach to water management for all water users</li> <li>• Stated that Aboriginal people shouldn’t have to pay for water and that it shouldn’t be treated as a commodity when it falls freely from the sky</li> <li>• Expressed concern about possible licensing of floodplain harvesting and want to be consulted on this</li> <li>• Sought further information on water regulation and the role of the Natural Resources Access Regulator</li> <li>• Expressed concern over different water sharing rules between New South Wales and Queensland</li> <li>• Expressed concern that farmers are releasing stagnant and contaminated water</li> <li>• Expressed concern with farmers allowing hooved stock into rivers and causing erosion</li> <li>• Expressed concern that contracts allowing access to river sand in some areas is culturally inappropriate</li> <li>• Stated there are social and environmental issues associated with the Sustainable Diversion Limit and suggested that it should be increased in the Northern Basin</li> <li>• Expressed a desire for information on how water management approaches will support responses to climate change</li> <li>• Expressed interest in working with government to produce better outcomes.</li> </ul>
<b>Natural flows and water licences</b>	<p>Stakeholders want river flows protected and more clarity around different water licence categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressed concern that river flows weren’t protected during the drought and stated that flows should reach the end of the system before any water extraction occurs upstream</li> <li>• Stated that Cultural flows encompass everything – social, political environmental and economic aspects – while it was felt that other flows are focusing only on the economic aspects</li> <li>• Stated that Cultural flows can contribute to land regeneration and management and more education on opportunities should be made available. It was further indicated that Cultural flows could positively impact on commercial opportunities</li> <li>• Expressed concern that some irrigators are taking too much water</li> <li>• Stated that water management challenges exist because ‘water was put on the market’ and expressed major concern over foreign ownership of water</li> <li>• Asked for information on why the department offers licences for sale</li> <li>• Indicated that critical water supply releases only made it as far as Walgett</li> </ul>

Topic	Comment
<b>Natural flows and water licences (continued)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sought more information on Cultural Water Access Licences, with some groups expressing interest in pursuing licence applications</li> <li>• First Nations groups are seeking information on how to access water as a right, like irrigators</li> <li>• Stressed the importance of river water for market gardens, noting that artesian water is not suitable.</li> </ul>
<b>Water quality</b>	<p>Stakeholders expressed deep concern for water quality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stated that the river was once clean and you could drink from it, but poor water quality has meant that people now drink bottled water</li> <li>• Expressed concern for high metal content, including iron and magnesium in river water</li> <li>• Stated that the use of fertiliser has contributed to the destruction of topsoil and created salinity issues</li> <li>• Indicated that river silting has been an issue over many years and explained that silting occurs when heavy rain follows a long dry period</li> <li>• Stated that water quality is poorest when the river isn't flowing and indicated that fishing can only be done when the river has been flowing for a few months</li> <li>• Expressed concern that flush events push stagnant water downstream and suggested that it is better to do full flushes rather than small flush events to manage water quality for towns</li> <li>• Expressed health concerns for pollution in the river especially for those that do not have access to town water supplies, indicating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Barkandji River Rangers have noted that the river smells in some sections</li> <li>– overgrown weeds in the river are toxic</li> <li>– concern that health advice warning against river water use is not being issued when poor water quality exists.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Stated a dislike of 'shandy water' when river water and groundwater are mixed together</li> <li>• Stated Wilcannia tap water smell is bad and cannot be used as drinking water</li> <li>• Stated that town (Walgett) was still on bore water which is slimy and smells and that the department should return only when they can provide a clean water system</li> <li>• Stated that a healthy river system with good quality water has an overall calming influence on Aboriginal/First Nations people.</li> </ul>

Topic	Comment
<b>Western Weirs</b>	<p>Stakeholders provided a range of specific comments regarding the proposed Western Weirs Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• supported the purpose of the Western Weirs Program so the impacts for people downstream can be considered, noting that upstream weirs impact on people downstream</li> <li>• expressed concern that existing Western Weirs have not been well planned and that the program is a result of the recent drought</li> <li>• expressed concern there are too many weirs and dams impacting on river flow</li> <li>• suggested that gates on weirs could help regulate water supply for people downstream</li> <li>• sought further clarification on the inclusion of fishways and turtle ways in any proposed new weir – it was noted by staff that further consultation with Department of Planning and Environment – Fisheries will be undertaken regarding this</li> <li>• stressed the importance of providing education about fish traps and do not want existing fish traps infrastructure removed</li> <li>• commented on specific weirs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Brewarrina Weir height and concern for silt at the fish traps</li> <li>– Bourke Weir history</li> <li>– location of proposed new Wilcannia Weir</li> <li>– treatment of Gin Gin Weir water and water rates</li> <li>– stagnation of Walgett Weir and impacts on biodiversity.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• sought further information on the relationship between the Western Weirs Program and the NSW Water Strategy.</li> </ul>

# Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group

Topic	Comment
<b>Connectivity in general</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The natural ephemeral state of the Darling and Northern Basin rivers must be recognised, clearly communicated and factored into decision-making.</li> <li>• There has been no assessment of the cumulative impacts of water reforms on water users.</li> <li>• Preference for rules-based approaches, rather than reliance on s324s – making sure rules are transparent, predictable and not subject to ad-hoc decision making or political discretion.</li> <li>• Water quality monitoring at regular intervals during critical dry events is essential for underpinning community preparedness for water quality issues and assisting river managers to deliver the best water quality outcome possible.</li> <li>• Concerns about an overly simplistic, blanket approach of a singular flow-target at Menindee.</li> <li>• Some stakeholders supported river connectivity – defined as flows to meet critical human, environmental and cultural needs – within the physical, hydrological and climatic limits on rainfall, inflows and flow rates. Others indicated that a broader range of flow classes should be considered for connectivity improvements.</li> <li>• In reality you cannot remove drought-induced risks to environmental and human water needs simply by restricting irrigators rights to water (which are largely restricted or suspended at these times anyway).</li> </ul>
<b>Data analysis on low and no flows</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some members suggested the questions being asked were reductionist and were not nuanced enough to unpack the full range of issues around ecological health, and that the data doesn't provide the evidence around the entire length of the river ceasing to flow.</li> <li>• There is disparity between the data presented and what was observed.</li> <li>• The data needs to be published and peer reviewed.</li> <li>• There was a request to access the data and methodology used for the department's study.</li> </ul>
<b>Aboriginal knowledge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aboriginal perspectives and science should be considered as another line of evidence.</li> <li>• Some stakeholders had challenges in marrying up the data with the knowledge passed down from Elders and what stakeholders have seen in their lifetimes.</li> <li>• First Nations/Aboriginal knowledge of climate, including the approach to nature's '7 seasons', should be considered.</li> </ul>
<b>Climate change and extended droughts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some stakeholders suggested that plans and decisions should not be made based on assumptions around a 1-in-10,000-year event, but rather should be based on more realistic scenarios and that critical needs and dry-time data are already built into existing water sharing plans.</li> </ul>

Topic	Comment
<b>Temporary water restrictions under s324 of the Water Management Act 2000</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In some instances, policy does not match on-the-ground reality. For example, in 2017 there was no connectivity in the Barwon–Darling but there had been supplementary access in the Gwydir.</li> <li>• Some stakeholders do not have faith in the government’s numbers.</li> <li>• The floodplain harvesting planned limits scenario does not appear to relate to modelling of the IQQM data.</li> <li>• Unallocated water belongs to First Nations/Aboriginal communities, who felt the department is trying to change floodplain harvesting rules to prevent access.</li> <li>• The recent experience with the Resumption of Flow rule should be used as an example to determine if economic analysis undertaken by Marsden-Jacob is correct: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– an economic rationale should be done to establish the economic impacts of first flush rules on all communities on the Darling River</li> <li>– there was strong support for having access to and understanding the underlying science and decision making that informed the triggers</li> <li>– there was a perception that more real-time monitoring gauges are needed. Furthermore, proposed triggers for catastrophic events should be more proactive and conservative.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>North-West Unregulated Flow Plan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unless channel constraints are addressed, there is no point in restricting access to water under a s324 embargo to meet a first flush target if the water is then wasted on the floodplain due to channel constraints. The channel and capacity constraints need to be fully understood before determining supplementary targets.</li> <li>• Connectivity targets need to be considered across all upstream valleys, including in Queensland.</li> <li>• Important to consider equity and simplicity across the whole suite of rules. Option 3 for the riparian targets was where equity and simplicity principles appear to be met.</li> <li>• Stakeholders noted the importance of considering water quality targets as well, not just the prevention of algal blooms.</li> <li>• One stakeholder noted that the North-West Flow Plan targets were developed on the back of the algal bloom event in the Darling River and it was disappointing they were interim for so long and rarely implemented.</li> </ul>
<b>Connectivity options in the Draft Western Regional Water Strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulation of the Barwon–Darling option is expensive and should be removed. A number of stakeholders didn’t support the option because it doesn’t create new water and will have environmental impacts. However, some stakeholders suggested that the only way it would work is by connecting it to an inland diversion scheme.</li> <li>• Some stakeholder didn’t support the use of environmental water to address connectivity outcomes.</li> </ul>

All feedback has been considered in developing the Draft Western Regional Water Strategy and stakeholders will continue to be engaged throughout the public exhibition process and the finalisation and implementation of the regional water strategies.

# Next steps

The Draft Western Regional Water Strategy will go on public exhibition in 2022 for a 6-week period. During this period, additional targeted and general public engagement will take place and written submissions will be accepted regarding the strategy.

Following the review of the public exhibition period, further targeted engagement will be undertaken before the final regional water strategy documents are published.



Image courtesy of Destination NSW. Sun setting over the Darling River, Bourke.



Image courtesy of Destination NSW. Townscape, Wilcannia.

