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Floodplain harvesting — the facts



Floodplain harvesting can only happen when there has been significant rainfall causing either localised or widespread flooding. Floodplain harvesting is a historically legitimate activity that has not yet been fully transitioned into the legislative framework provided by the Water Management Act 2000.

There needs to be a lot of rain for floodplain harvesting to happen

Floodplain harvesting happens when water spills out from a river during a major flood, or on the way to the river after a major or significant rain event.

Table 1. Floodplain harvesting:

Includes	Does not include
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Rainfall run-off flowing towards a river or creek ✓ Overbank flow that originates from rivers or creeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Water taken under an existing water access licence ✗ Water taken under a basic landholder right (including a harvestable right) ✗ Water taken under an exemption ✗ Used irrigation water

Floodplain harvesting is historically legitimate

Floodplain harvesting is a historically legitimate practice that has not been fully transitioned into the licensing framework provided by the *Water Management Act 2000*. It accounts for approximately 25% of irrigation water that can be taken on average under the surface water extraction limits in the northern Basin valleys of NSW and supports economic activity worth more than \$650 million annually on average.

Growth in infrastructure does not equal growth in floodplain harvesting

This is because changes in long-term floodplain harvesting diversions are a function of climate, water sharing rules, user behaviour and infrastructure. Each of these has changed significantly since 1993 and we assess their interaction through river system models. On-farm infrastructure has increased significantly since 1993, although most of this growth occurred prior to 2008.

How and why water is taken and stored



Water stored in on-farm dams comes from many forms of take including floodplain harvesting, water pumped from regulated and unregulated rivers and groundwater.



Irrigators take and store water to **drought-proof and ensure stability** in a highly variable boom-bust system.



Changes to water sharing rules and more conservative water user behavior are **offsetting much of the impact of increased infrastructure**.



Infrastructure includes dams, pipes and pumps. **Most growth in on-farm infrastructure is historic**.

Floodplain harvesting reform is vital

Without floodplain harvesting reform it will be impossible to protect the environment and downstream communities from uncontrolled floodplain harvesting. This reform can be likened to speeding limits on a road. It doesn't change the limits, rather it provides the framework and the technology to ensure that the limits are not being exceeded. Stopping the reform removes our ability to monitor and control when and how floodplain harvesting occurs.

Uncontrolled floodplain harvesting harms the environment and negatively affects downstream communities and water users. Fully implementing the NSW Floodplain Harvesting Policy will provide a legally enforceable framework to reduce floodplain harvesting where it's gone above legal limits and prevent further growth.

Water take is influenced by our climate, rules, water user behaviour and use of infrastructure like dams, pipes and pumps.

If the floodplain harvesting regulations had not been disallowed, the following controls would now be in place:

- Requirement for installation of accurate, reliable, and tamper-proof measurement equipment on all on-farm water storages greater than 1000ML that are used for floodplain harvesting, supplying data on water take in near real-time
- Licences and water sharing rules that deliver significant reductions in floodplain harvesting across the northern Basin, requiring for example more than a 30% decrease in floodplain harvesting in the Gwydir valley
- Licences and water sharing rules that deliver significant environmental benefits, for example improvements of around 140% in some of the water requirements for waterbirds in the Ramsar-listed Gwydir Wetlands
- Water sharing rules that manage floodplain harvesting such that supplementary water allocations do not need to be reduced, for example, a 50% reduction in allocations for supplementary access licences in the Gwydir is currently required to ensure that total diversions comply with legal limits.

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