

What we heard

From 6 to 14 February 2019, the NSW Department of Industry and WaterNSW held a series of meetings with communities in critically drought-affected river systems.

The purpose of these meetings was to hear community views on how remaining, limited water supplies should be managed and to provide advice on current water availability and the water resource outlook.

Locations

Two meetings were held in each of the NSW river valleys where drought measures have been introduced to conserve the remaining, limited water supplies. The first session was with targeted stakeholder groups and the second was an open public session.

The meetings were promoted using emails to stakeholders, community members and groups, local councils, and other relevant organisations. This was supported by posters and flyers on local community noticeboards and through local networks, such as Local Land Services. Unfortunately, the state election advertising blackout from 26 January 2019 precluded the use of advertising across local newspapers, radio and social media.

Table 1. Summary of community drought meetings, February 2019

Date (2019)	Location	No. of attendees	Groups represented
Wednesday 6 February	Moree	~10 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> irrigation companies Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association
Wednesday 6 February	Moree	~20 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSW Irrigation Council Native Title representatives farming businesses
Thursday 7 February	Narrabri	~10 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> local councils local businesses sailing club
Thursday 7 February	Narrabri	~20 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> political parties businesses farmers conservation group Aboriginal representatives
Friday 8 February	Walgett	~16 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> local councillors NSW Health Aboriginal representatives water users
Friday 8 February	Walgett	~22 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> community members businesses Country Women's Association
Monday 11 February	Dubbo	~22 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> local councils

Date (2019)	Location	No. of attendees	Groups represented
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> farmers
Monday 11 February	Dubbo	~20 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> landholders farmers community members
Thursday 14 February	Pooncarie	~20 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> local councils NSW Health Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA), Commonwealth Environmental Water Office landholders rural financial counsellors
Thursday 14 February	Pooncarie	~30 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> community members landholders Aboriginal owners and organisations

Key information provided at the meetings

The meetings were facilitated by the NSW Drought Coordinator and Land & Water Commissioner Jock Laurie. Most meetings were also attended by the Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator, James McTavish.

The NSW Department of Industry explained the regulatory and policy context for managing water supplies under the Extreme Events Policy, industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/extreme-events

The department's presentation is available at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/update/information-sessions

WaterNSW provided information on the current water supply situation for each river system, how we got here, and weather outlooks.

Across the northern inland regulated river systems, inflows for the last six years have been well below the long-term average, except for a six-month period in 2016–17. These valleys have received record or near-record low inflows—lower than that which occurred in the previous millennium drought.

The WaterNSW presentations are available at waternsw.com.au/supply/drought-information/regional-nsw

Common issues raised

Below is a summary of the common issues raised at most or all meeting locations and the response or follow-up.

Table 2. Summary of common issues

Issue	Response
<p>Information on current drought situation should be more accessible and widely available.</p> <p>Government should look at general education materials for high schools etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WaterNSW is now providing valley-specific drought information on its website, Regional NSW Drought Information at water.nsw.gov.au/supply/drought-information/regional-nsw NSW Department of Industry also has a Drought Update page on its website at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/update Government agencies will return in April or May to provide more updates on the situation, including groundwater. Agencies will provide updates through all forms of media, and will continue to seek feedback to improve the accessibility of this information.
<p>More information on the extent and severity of the drought in the north and far west should be in the media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drought meetings have been reported on by local media. Adrian Langdon, WaterNSW, recently appeared on Landline. WaterNSW and NSW Department of Industry will explore more media opportunities, noting that there are some limitations in the lead up to the NSW election on 23 March 2019.
<p>The purpose of releases, particularly environmental releases, is not clear to the general community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WaterNSW and NSW Department of Industry will consider providing regular information through local valley media on dam releases, including dates, volumes and the purpose of the releases. NSW Department of Industry is now identifying the breakdown of water released from storage in Water Allocation Statements— that is, high-priority needs, river operations, environmental watering and general security orders. NSW Department of Industry will work with the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) on improving communication around the timing and purpose of environmental releases. Information on Water for the Environment, including annual watering priorities is available at OEH's website at environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/water/water-for-the-environment

Issue	Response
<p>What proportion of water in the river system contributes to groundwater recharge?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NSW Department of Industry and WaterNSW will assess river losses to groundwater and provide information on the website.
<p>Information needs to be provided not just about water allocated and released but also how it is used, including supplementary water.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WaterNSW publishes Weekly Water Availability Reports at waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/availability • NSW Department of Industry produces regular Water Allocation Statements which show the available water and the distribution between different categories of water users. Copies are available from industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/allocations/statements
<p>What impact is the drought having on groundwater systems and availability?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NSW Department of Industry and WaterNSW will provide valley information on the impacts of the dry conditions on alluvial groundwater systems. • WaterNSW provides data on real-time monitoring at individual bore sites across the state, showing groundwater levels, over various time periods. This data is available at realtimedata.waternsw.com.au • WaterNSW will work to make this groundwater monitoring data easier to access from various locations. • More information on groundwater will be provided at the next meetings.
<p>What impact is floodplain harvesting having on system inflows?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Floodplain harvesting takes place during overland flow periods. Currently, this is not happening. • NSW Department of Industry is working to licence floodplain harvesting, which will ensure that long-term extractions do not increase above levels as at 3 July 2008. • More information on NSW Floodplain Harvesting Policy is available at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/plans-programs/healthy-floodplains-project/harvesting
<p>The government should provide advance warning of future restrictions to all water users.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WaterNSW and NSW Department of Industry regularly provide information on how the drought is affecting water deliveries in NSW regulated rivers. This includes individual discussions with high-priority licence holders that may be at risk. • Seasonal outlooks are included in the Water Allocation Statements at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/allocations/statements/2018 • Temporary water restrictions across the system and their reasons are communicated on the NSW Department of Industry website: industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/temporary-water-restrictions • The timeliness and mode of communication of any market-sensitive information must be carefully

Issue	Response
	<p>considered to ensure equitable access.</p>
<p>Why aren't more dams, weirs, re-regulating structures and other infrastructure being built to secure supplies?</p> <p>Why do weirs need to include expensive fishways?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NSW Department of Industry is developing regional water strategies to identify future water supply risks and to determine policy, regulatory and infrastructure options for managing these risks over the next 30 years. • Fishways provide important environmental benefits without removing valuable water from economic use in towns and communities. Some information on the purpose and types of fishways is available at: dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/habitat/rehabilitating/fishways . NSW Department of Industry will work with NSW Department of Primary Industries—Fisheries to provide more information on fishway requirements and benefits. • Funding has been committed to the upgrade of Walgett and Wilcannia town water supply weirs. NSW Department of Industry will provide more information on timeframes for construction of these two projects. • NSW Government has the ongoing \$1 billion Safe and Secure Program for financial and technical assistance for local water utilities (usually councils) to upgrade their town water supplies, plus emergency funding for water carting and bores. Information is available at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/plans-programs/infrastructure-programs/safe-and-secure-water-program • WaterNSW has developed a 20-year infrastructure options study listing possible options in each valley. A copy is available at: waternsw.com.au/projects/infrastructure-studies/20-year-infrastructure-options-study
<p>Will the next supplementary event or inflows be embargoed from extraction? We need clarity about the public interest test when flows are embargoed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factors such as the location of the flows, timing and size need to be taken into account when making decisions about how the next event/s is/are managed. • Embargoes on access are imposed through temporary water restrictions under section 324 of the <i>Water Management Act 2000</i>. • The NSW Department of Industry publishes temporary water restrictions and the reasons for imposing the restrictions at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/temporary-water-restrictions • As part of the review of the Barwon–Darling Water Sharing Plan, NSW Department of Industry is developing a first-flush rule that will form part of the revised plan. Public consultation will occur on the rule later this year. • Information on the actions being considered to protect environmental flows is available at : industry.nsw.gov.au/water-reform/better-management-of-environmental-water

Issue	Response
<p>Concerns about illegal pumping</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Natural Resources Access Regulator (NRAR) has been established as an independent regulator to investigate illegal extractions. The NRAR has undertaken a significant number of enforcement actions since commencement on 30 April 2018, with 6 active prosecutions, 512 investigations finalised, 36 penalty notices, 30 statutory directions issued and 219 warning and advisory letters sent. Concerns should be reported. Contact details for the NRAR are: Phone: 1800 633 362 Email: nrar.enquiries@nrar.nsw.gov.au
<p>Constant water reform is undermining business confidence—the reasons for and outcomes of these reforms need to be better explained</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSW Department of Industry acknowledges that there is significant water reform happening and will improve information about the reforms on its website. Information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the NSW Government's Water Reform Action Plan is at industry.nsw.gov.au/water-reform roll out of non-urban water metering framework is at industry.nsw.gov.au/water-reform/metering-framework the <i>Basin Plan 2012</i> and associated NSW supply and efficiency measures to meet the water recovery targets are at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/basins-catchments/murray-darling/basin-plan the requirements for water resource plans and the public exhibition of draft plans are available at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/plans-programs/water-resource-plans implementation of the floodplain harvesting policy is at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/plans-programs/healthy-floodplains-project/harvesting better management of environmental water is at industry.nsw.gov.au/water-reform/better-management-of-environmental-water
<p>How can community interests be represented on the Critical Water Advisory Panels?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Critical Water Advisory Panels are made up of a broad range of government representatives. The aim of the community meetings held between 6 and 14 February was to hear about local concerns to consider in the next panel meetings. WaterNSW seeks and collates community input and concerns to ensure that the panels have this information available to them. Communiques from panel meetings will be posted on NSW Department of Industry website at industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/update/critical-water-

Issue	Response
	<p>advisory-panels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given the important role of local government, councils will also be represented on the panels through the relevant Joint Organisations of Councils.
<p>What is the NSW Government's response to the South Australian Royal Commission into the Basin Plan?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The NSW Government acknowledges concerns about the validity of the Basin Plan. However, this is an issue for the Commonwealth. The NSW Government position remains that the Basin Plan must consider the social and economic impacts on communities.
<p>Impacts on community mental health are significant because of the drought</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governments are providing additional funding for mental health support. Information on the Rural Adversity Mental Health Program is available at ramhp.com.au/about-us/ The process for accessing financial assistance is being reviewed to expedite claims. For information on Rural Financial Counselling Services go to agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/drought/assistance/rural-financial-counselling-service
<p>What control is there over Queensland extractions?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSW does not have control over extractions in Queensland. However, Queensland is held accountable for water extractions through the Murray–Darling Basin Plan and the sustainable diversion limits (and prior to the limits, the previous Murray–Darling Basin Cap). The south-western portion of Queensland has been in a longer dry period than NSW—they did not receive the 2016–17 inflows.

Specific issues raised

Table 3. Summary—Moree

Specific issues—Moree	Response
Why was water being released for environmental benefit when towns like Walgett are running out of water?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OEH advised that water is being provided to environmental assets, such as the Gwydir wetlands, to get ready for more dry periods. Releases were made to the Gwydir wetlands from mid-July to November 2018, amounting to some 41,000 ML. The aim is to maintain wetland vegetation. Information on annual environmental water priorities is available from OEH's website at environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/water/water-for-the-environment/gwydir • The final release from Keepit Dam in December 2018 was made on top of previous releases in an attempt to push flow through to Walgett's weir on the Namoi River. In addition to town water supply, this provided within-channel environmental benefits along the full length of the river. • Walgett and other towns have emergency groundwater supplies.
Individual issue about wording on groundwater licence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WaterNSW will follow up with the individual.
Native Title Group issues with flooding of sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group has written to the Minister for the Environment. NSW Department of Industry will follow up with OEH.

Table 4. Summary—Narrabri

Specific issues—Narrabri	Response
Water should have been retained in Keepit Dam for recreation. The government should maintain a minimum of 10% in all dams for recreation—water sharing plans should be amended to include this	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The decision to release water to Walgett rather than retaining a very small volume in Keepit Dam was based on priorities in the <i>Water Management Act 2000</i>. Also, there was insufficient water to keep as a reserve in the dam. Walgett received a small volume, which was used for some outside watering, while the river received a flow that also benefited domestic and stock users, the environment and delivered remaining account water. • Retaining volumes in storage for recreation in dry periods would have significant impacts on water security.
Councils could share their bore data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WaterNSW will work with councils on improving access to groundwater data.
Is there a threshold for groundwater levels at which point restrictions will	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groundwater systems are monitored and local area restrictions may be applied. Long-term models for groundwater recharge and assessment of groundwater

Specific issues—Narrabri	Response
apply?	levels are used to determine the need for any restrictions.
Do evaporation losses reduce the water available from an allocation when it is taken over multiple years?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not in the Namoi, but is included in the accounting rules in the Macquarie–Cudgegong River.
Can users pump when environmental flows occur?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Once the environmental release has achieved its required purpose at the intended target point, then extractive use can occur downstream.
Why are mines able to pump water from an environmental flow? How much water do the mines use?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mines and other licence holders are not allowed to pump from a protected environmental flow. However, often releases are made for combined purposes, and water may be released for the environment at the same time that water is released to provide water to licensed water users. The volume of water for mining is small in the Namoi Valley relative to irrigation extractions.
Individual's concern that pumping condition on their unregulated river licence is tied to flows at a certain site. They need to drive to check the site.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSW Department of Industry will follow up to ascertain whether licence can instead be tied to a nearby gauge site that can be checked online.

Table 5. Summary—Walgett

Specific issues—Walgett	Response
The quality of Walgett's artesian supply and impacts on health—both immediate for those suffering chronic health conditions and the general population in the longer term. This should be addressed publicly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSW Health is monitoring the water quality monthly and will work with Walgett Council to place the results of the testing on the council's website. NSW Health is also liaising with local medical staff. The NSW Government is working with Walgett Shire Council to ensure that all residents have access to a safe and reliable water supply, and is also working to provide information and advice to the community.
Barwon-Darling irrigator asked if the government would buy account water (temporary trade to provide money for himself and the community).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSW Department of Industry will follow up. However, NSW Government is not buying any water and Commonwealth Environmental Water Office does not purchase account water. This account water, just as for irrigation purposes, could only be used following significant rainfall and higher river flows.
Why isn't more water being released from Copeton and Glenlyon Dams to flow through to Menindee Lakes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A connectivity release last year from Gwydir and Border Rivers was made on top of a natural inflow event and in the cooler months. There is limited environmental water still available in the

Specific issues—Walgett	Response
	<p>upstream storages. A release now in summer would take significantly larger quantities of water (60,000 to 80,000 ML or more) and could cause water quality problems.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A further release by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office is under consideration, possibly when the weather cools.
Concern by irrigators about paying water charges when no water is used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NSW Government has waived fixed water charges for 2018–19. Licences can be handed back if holders do not use them and do not want to pay water charges.
Why is it taking so long for work to commence on Walgett Weir upgrade?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding has been committed. Walgett Weir Raising and Fishway have received 100% funding from the NSW Government of \$8.3 million. This includes funding for the project to allow construction of a fishway, which is a regulatory requirement of the weir raising works. • A tender for construction will be released shortly. • The Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator will work with council to assist the process.
Walgett Council should water the hospital grounds to help with mental wellbeing of patients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator will work with council.

Table 6. Summary—Dubbo

Specific issues—Dubbo	Response
<p>Why wasn't piping of Albert Priest Channel undertaken?</p> <p>Councils need to have integrated supply network.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The water security of the Cobar region has been a focus of the government. • Since 2014, the NSW Government has provided over \$37 million to water projects in the Cobar region. • The Nyngan Cobar Water Security Project has explored the feasibility of a number of options to address the long-term water security for the region. • Improvements to the channel are still being considered. • The Regional Water Strategy will look at water security risks and options on a valley scale.
Why can't the flood mitigation zone for Burrendong Dam be used for storage?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is one of a number of options under consideration. The increased flooding risks if the 40% flood mitigation component was converted to storage would need to be assessed. • The Macquarie Regional Water Strategy will be an important process to assess the range of options.
What is being done about any environmental over-recovery in the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental water that has been recovered is held by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder. • The NSW Government has no control over decisions

Specific issues—Dubbo	Response
Macquarie?	made by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder about its entitlements. Similarly, the government would not seek to force other licence holders to sell their entitlements either.
Water should be going down the effluent creeks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are issues with cumbungi choking these creeks that affects delivery efficiency.
Is general security carryover safe?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is only a small volume of carryover (6GL) remaining—this is secure until the end of this water year.
At what point do towns put restrictions on watering of parks and gardens?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Town water restrictions are a matter for councils. It is acknowledged that if possible, green fields are important in dry times for the wellbeing of communities.
Can the dead storage of dams be pumped?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes—it is an option for high-priority uses at relatively small volumes.
The 30% suspension of general security carryover water was accepted because it was made early enough for irrigators to adjust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advance notice is important for users' planning and this was why the decision was taken at the start of the water year.
How quickly can the drought situation turn around?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very quickly with good rainfall and high inflows. Burrendong Dam can fill in 20 to 30 days.
Why can't the government control the prices of water traded so that we can buy water to grow hay for stock?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water trade prices are set by the individuals—the government does not intervene in the market. Many farmers make their only income during drought periods by selling their account water.

Table 7. Summary—Pooncarie

Specific issues—Pooncarie	Response
<p>How is connectivity being addressed in the water sharing plans?</p> <p>Plans are being done in the wrong order—downstream plans should be done first.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSW Department of Industry is examining solutions to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> better understand northern connectivity actively manage held environmental water in-stream manage resumption of flows in the Barwon–Darling, after an extended dry period limit daily water take in the Barwon–Darling. More information is available at industry.nsw.gov.au/water-reform/better-management-of-environmental-water
How are councils advised of temporary water restrictions and drought stages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because the information is market-sensitive, everyone is advised at the same time. NSW Department of Industry will endeavour to ensure

Specific issues—Pooncarie	Response
	that councils are notified as soon as possible.
Where are inflows to Menindee Lakes measured?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At the Wilcannia gauging station.
How much water was illegally extracted upstream?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigations have been undertaken by WaterNSW and the new, independent Natural Resources Access Regulator, and these are now a matter for the courts. Potential fines are large.
Which drought of record is used for planning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For allocations, it is the worst period of low inflows, based on historical flow information when the water sharing plan commenced. For drought planning purposes, the most severe drought of all records is also taken into consideration, including the current drought.
Councils could have constructed block banks more quickly and cheaply.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noted. Local government will now participate directly in the Critical Water Advisory Panels through the Joint Organisations of Councils.
What is being done about towns not having sufficient water for firefighting purposes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The issue has been noted by the Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator, who will discuss it with the Rural Fire Services.
Water should be set aside in the water sharing plans to provide base flow from the top to the bottom of the Barwon–Darling.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Barwon–Darling water sharing plan is being reviewed as part of the development of the water resource plan. The draft plan will be placed on public exhibition for comment. As part of this process, the Natural Resources Commission is reviewing the current Barwon–Darling water sharing plan and seeking public input. More information is available at the Commission’s website at nrc.nsw.gov.au The community can give input for the commission’s review and the draft water resource plan development processes: Many options for environmental flows have been modelled and will be considered through the water resource plan process.
We need information on why a further connectivity release cannot be made at this time. Councils can be a conduit for dissemination of information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Commonwealth Environmental Water Office, in consultation with NSW Department of Industry, WaterNSW, NSW Department of Primary Industries—Fisheries, OEH and the MDBA, is considering the possibility and risks relating to another release.
Reconfiguring Menindee Lakes will allow the Lakes to drain faster. Releases should have been reduced earlier to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noted. Any changes to the agreement will need to be discussed and agreed with Basin Plan states and the Commonwealth Government.

Specific issues—Pooncarie	Response
retain water for Lower Darling. The Murray–Darling Agreement needs to be changed to protect Lower Darling supplies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For more information on the process for developing the Menindee Lakes water savings project go to: industry.nsw.gov.au/water/plans-programs/water-recovery-programs/sustainable-diversion-limits/menindee-lakes
The government needs to consult more with Aboriginal communities and on Country. The Lake Victoria report written by an Aboriginal Elder is an example of the information that can be provided by Aboriginal groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreed. The NSW Government is also undertaking Nation-by-Nation consultation as part of the development of water resource plans.
Department needs to consult with Lower Darling community on floodplain harvesting	NSW Department of Industry will undertake consultation on the implementation of the floodplain harvesting policy in the coming months.

More community drought meetings

If the drought continues, more meetings will be held in April–May 2019. It is expected that the focus of these meetings will shift toward groundwater access.