

Summary of meetings in 2018

The Barwon–Darling and Lower Darling Critical Water Advisory Panel held four meetings in 2018—on 27 March, 5 July, 17 September and 23 November 2018.

The panel was established in response to extended dry conditions in far western NSW. Read the critical water advisory panels fact sheet (visit www.industry.nsw.gov.au and search for 'fact sheet critical water advisory panels' for information on the function and membership of these panels.

This communique provides a summary of the meeting outcomes for 2018.

Drought status (2018)

Barwon–Darling

- A dry winter and spring in 2017 resulted in flows ceasing in the upstream reaches before the end of December 2017 and downstream in early January 2018.
- On top of a natural inflow event, the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office and the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage agreed to release in April 2018 around 30 gigalitres of environmental water. The releases from Glenlyon Dam on the Border Rivers and Copeton Dam on the Gwydir River were made to provide a flow into the Barwon–Darling. Around 7 gigalitres reached Wilcannia in July 2018 and a small volume entered the Menindee Lakes.
- This event was protected, with no irrigation pumping permitted, to replenish pools in the river.
- A number of agencies worked together to ensure that the flow reached as far as possible along the length of the river.
- Following this release, known as the 'northern connectivity event', there were no further significant inflows in the Barwon–Darling for the rest of 2018.

Lower Darling and the Menindee Lakes

- During 2018, no significant water entered the Menindee Lakes.
- The Menindee Lakes fell below 480 gigalitres and back into NSW operational control in mid-December 2017.
- The drought operations plan was introduced in December 2017, involving small releases below normal minimums to increase the longevity of supply.
- By November 2018, the active storage capacity of the Menindee Lakes had dropped to 58 gigalitres.
- Copi Hollow was to be used to supply Broken Hill until the Murray River pipeline was completed.

Extreme events policy options

The NSW Extreme Events Policy was publicly released on 30 October 2018 on the Department of Industry website (industry.nsw.gov.au/water/what-we-do/legislation-policies/eep).

By November 2018, the Barwon–Darling and Lower Darling Rivers were in Stage 3 (Severe Drought), with the Lower Darling expected to reach Stage 4 (Critical Drought) by the end of the year.

Discussion of options

Barwon–Darling

The panel discussed the factors that would need to be considered if inflows occurred in the Barwon–Darling. Key factors in making a decision on suspending access to flows included:

- the size of the event
- equity issues between upstream and downstream reaches
- water sharing plan arrangements
- connectivity
- evidence base.

The panel agreed to convene at short notice if an upstream event is likely to require advice around suspension.

Lower Darling

The panel discussed the following options to address water shortages in the Lower Darling:

- pumping transfers from Lake Tandure to Lake Wetherell to reduce evaporation. This occurred through the autumn of 2018
- installation of a bank between lake Pamamaroo and Copi Hollow to allow pumping into Copi Hollow to reduce surface area and preserve water for Broken Hill's town water supply. This was constructed
- construction of block banks in the Lower Darling between Pooncarie and Wentworth to maintain supply for permanent plantings, stock and domestic use into summer/autumn. Two block banks between Pooncarie and Wentworth were constructed by August 2018, and the third by November 2018. Work on approvals for the final block bank was underway by the end of 2018
- agreement to seek waiver of application fee for small private block banks for those landholders that couldn't be supplied by the larger block banks. This was provided
- restrictions to critical needs only in the Lower Darling. This restriction was introduced on 4 December 2018.

Future meetings

Panel members agreed that community drought meetings should be held in early 2019 to provide input on local concerns to the critical water advisory panels.