

## Temporary water restrictions on river and overland flows in the northern Basin

*A summary of recent rainfall and flows in the northern NSW Murray–Darling Basin and the rationale for temporary restrictions on access*

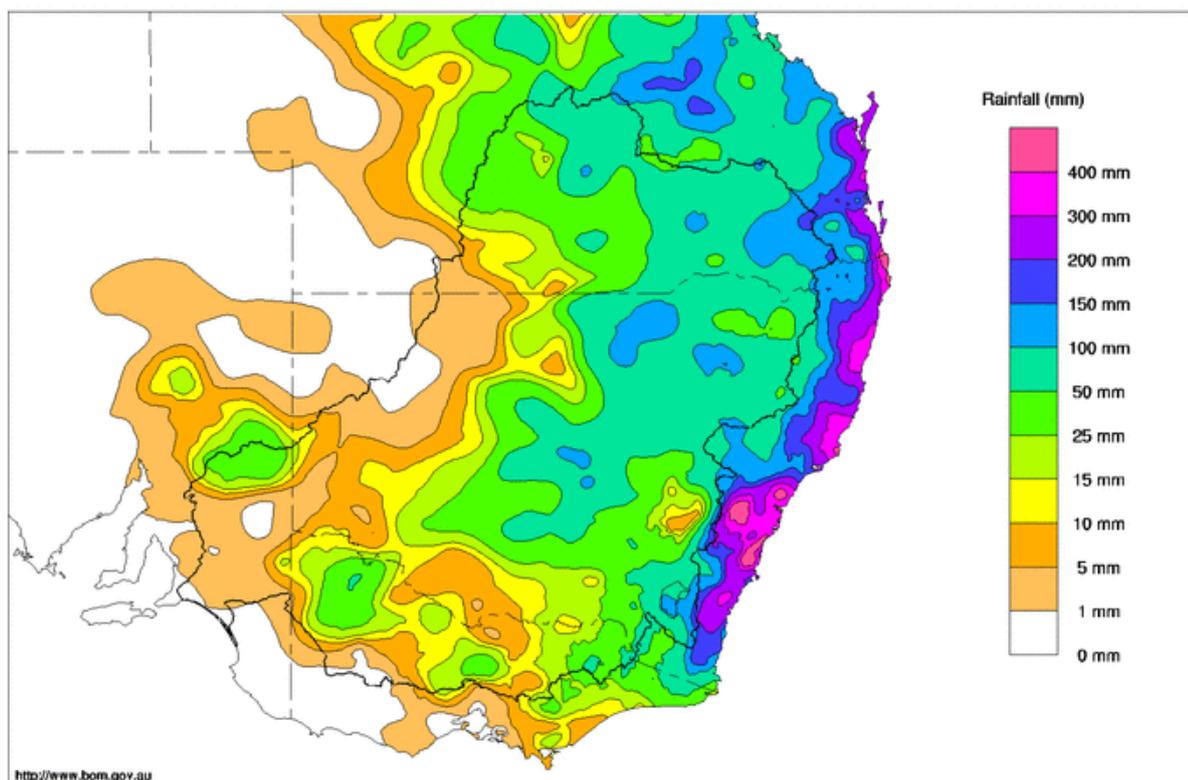
### Rainfall and flows

Widespread rain fell across the coastal and northern parts of NSW between 6 and 11 February 2020, resulting in some long-awaited inflows. The heaviest rainfall and largest flows are along the NSW coast, although there has been some welcome rain inland too.

Inflows to NSW regulated river storages are very small. There are some higher localised flows further downstream in the Namoi valley and parts of the lower Gwydir that are beginning to restart rivers for the first time in many months.

Inflows in the Namoi valley are quite widespread, with most rivers and creeks contributing towards flows in the range of 5,000 to 15,000 megalitres per day for several days at Narrabri. The upper Barwon river is receiving water, with forecasts indicating flows along the Barwon–Darling river could extend to Menindee Lakes if widespread temporary water restrictions remain in place.

Murray-Darling Rainfall Totals (mm) Week Ending 11th February 2020  
Australian Bureau of Meteorology



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## Restrictions to access

The vast bulk of extraction in the northern NSW Basin has remained suspended to preserve water for town water supplies, domestic and stock needs, and to restart the river system as far downstream as possible. This includes restrictions to floodplain harvesting.

As a result of these restrictions, some of the largest flows in many months are entering the Barwon–Darling, with critical supplies returned to towns, basic landholder rights, domestic and stock supplies. The water is refilling key refugia along stretches of the river, as was the intent of the initial restriction.

These restrictions will maximise the inflows into the weir pools at Walgett, Brewarrina and Bourke to secure those towns' water supplies. The Brewarrina weir pool has been subject to high levels of salinity for many months now. Flows are expected to refresh the remnant pool, providing water quality benefits for both town water supplies and the health of the riverine environment.

The protected flows may reach all the way to Menindee Lakes. This is the first opportunity in almost two years to achieve full river connectivity in the northern NSW Basin. Were this to happen, it would result in substantial benefits for fish health and the riverine environment and would be consistent with the recommendations of recent inquiries into water management of the northern Basin.

## Localised easing of restrictions

On 8–9 February 2020 in response to inflows, some localised restrictions were lifted:

- in unregulated rivers in the Namoi valley and lower parts of the Gwydir valley where the flows vastly exceeded the pump capacities
- for high security access in the Peel, Upper Namoi and Lower Namoi regulated rivers
- to allow some access to floodplain water in the lower Gwydir for three days where there are imminent threats to infrastructure.

On 9–10 February 2020, additional temporary lifting was approved for floodplain harvesting for three days in parts of the lower Namoi, Barwon–Darling and Gwydir floodplains because some local and downstream flow targets had been met, and to minimise flood impacts for people and on-farm infrastructure. These limited exemptions to the 324 order expire at midnight on 13 February.

Given the size of the flows and localised flooding, the limited take permitted is not expected to materially impact on downstream flow targets.

Forecasts along the Barwon–Darling River as at 12 February 2020 are given in WaterNSW's Operational Update available from [waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates](http://waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates). The department and WaterNSW are considering how to maximise the benefits of these inflows to replenish the Lower Darling, mitigate water quality risks, and weigh up water security risks should conditions return to dry.

We are actively reviewing this situation considering the latest information on rainfall and flows. With some additional rainfall expected and water already in the system, further increases to river flows are possible. Water users should ensure they are signed up to the Early Warning Network for notifications and check the department's website for updates. See the links at the end of this document.

## General principles

In making decisions about whether to temporarily restrict access to water, the department must be satisfied that making the order is in the public interest. In relation to the recent orders in the northern NSW Basin, this included carefully weighing up the:

- local water needs and their relative priorities of access
- critical water needs downstream
- ability for the inflows to meaningfully contribute to meeting critical water needs downstream
- uncertainty in future rainfall and flow predictions.

Given the extreme dry conditions across the whole of the northern Basin, the main priority is to restart the rivers and meet critical needs as far downstream as possible. Where critical needs have been met for parts of the water source, or are forecast to be met, consideration is given to allow some local extraction. This may occur where impacts downstream are expected to be minimal.

## Priorities of access

The NSW *Water Management Act 2000* sets out the general priorities of access to water. This involves promoting the protection of the water source and its dependent ecosystems as well as basic landholder rights to water. During severe water shortages however, the focus shifts towards securing critical domestic water needs.

When managing extractions in the northern Basin, domestic needs for essential town services and individual landholders are prioritised. Water for stock and high-security access licences are then considered as the next highest priority. Given the size of the current event, the potential to enable connectivity to the Lower Darling is also prioritised.

## Next steps and further information

We intend that the northern basin restrictions will apply until 28 February 2020. We will carefully monitor further rainfall and inflows and restrictions may be amended.

Sign up to WaterNSW's Early Warning Network if you'd like to be notified by text message of the latest updates: [waternsw.com.au/supply/ewn](http://waternsw.com.au/supply/ewn)

The details of the current temporary water restrictions are available on the department's website at [industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/temporary-water-restrictions](http://industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/temporary-water-restrictions)

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