

## Background

The Barwon-Darling River system connects the northern Murray-Darling Basin with the southern Basin and joins the Murray River at Wentworth. Over 90% of the inflows into the Barwon-Darling originate in Queensland or the Northern NSW catchments of the Warrego, Border Rivers, Gwydir, Namoi and Macquarie-Castlereagh.

The flows in the Barwon-Darling sustain communities, the environment and industries along the length of the river from Mungindi in the North to Wentworth in the South and into the Murray River.

The NSW Government has heard a range of views on what an adequate level of connectivity should be, and what needs to be done to achieve it.

In addition, over the last 5 years, a range of independent reviews have recommended taking action to improve connectivity between the north and the south of the Basin. This includes recommendations from the Independent Panel Assessment of the Management of the 2020 Northern Basin First Flush Event (first flush review). Off the back of that the department is seeking to reconvene the stakeholder panel that informed the first flush review to test options around connectivity.

The department will be exploring short term and long-term options around connectivity through the Western Regional Water Strategy. This will involve scoping out an initial scope of what “connectivity” we need to focus on, evidence on how often these levels of connectivity are met or not met, and options that could help address the focus.

The draft Western Regional Water Strategy will investigate options to improve connectivity. The focus of the connectivity discussions of the Stakeholder Reference Group will be on longitudinal connectivity aimed at addressing critical needs at low and no flows and during the first flush.

The draft Western Regional Water Strategy, critical environmental need triggers and the review of targets in the North West Unregulated Flow Plan will separately be subject to public consultation noting that these aspects have been developed following feedback from the stakeholder reference group as outlined below.

## Purpose of the Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group

The purpose of the stakeholder reference group is to provide basin wide perspectives to the department on connectivity proposals that are being developed as part of the draft Western Regional Water Strategy. This will involve receiving and reviewing information on short- and longer-term connectivity proposals from the department and providing information on how those proposals may benefit or impact different stakeholder groups in their part of the Basin.

The group does not replace public consultation processes.

## Functions of the Reference Group

The connectivity stakeholder reference group will have an advisory role to the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment – Water and will not be a decision-making body.

The primary functions of the Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group include (but are not limited to):

- exploring diverse issues pertaining to the connectivity proposals
- provide opinion and advice on documents, proposals and options presented, including objective evidence to help assess the options
- identify gaps in evidence or opportunities
- provide a focus and a forum for the discussion of cultural, technical, social, economic and ecological issues, and for the distillation of different views
- identify and advise on any opportunities, emergent issues or risks to the proposals.

## Aboriginal perspectives

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The Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group does not replace existing engagement with Aboriginal communities on water matters, and discussions with those who speak for Country. The intention is to make sure there are a range of Aboriginal members on the group to provide Aboriginal perspectives on the work before the broader, public consultation processes.

### Focus of meetings

Meeting	Date	Purpose	Where will the meeting be held?
1	25 August 2021	The objective of this meeting will be for all members to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have a clear understanding of the role of the group, it's purpose and how they contribute</li><li>• Be aware of background information, including<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Historical climate in the Barwon-Darling</li><li>b. Cease to flow and low flow</li><li>c. Impact of development and Water Sharing Plan changes on cease to flow and low flow events</li><li>d. Climate change impacts</li></ul></li></ul>	Online
2	October 2021	Discuss the focus of connectivity	Online
3	November 2021	Feedback on how your feedback has been incorporated – before the western regional water strategy is released for public exhibition	Online

DPIE Water will work with Aboriginal representatives to determine whether additional meetings to provide specific cultural impact feedback should be scheduled.

There may be a requirement for additional meetings dependant on the evolution of other connectivity related projects

### Facilitator and Secretariat

#### Facilitator

An independent facilitator will be appointed by NSW DPIE in accordance with DPIE's procurement process. The facilitator's responsibilities include (but are not limited to):

- building understanding of the Project amongst reference group members
- Building the relationship with and between stakeholder reference group members, facilitating engagement between members and the department
- ensure that everyone in the room gets an equal opportunity to provide their opinions and have their voices heard
- ensure meetings are conducted in an orderly and respectful way.

#### Secretariat

DPIE-Water will provide secretariat support to the facilitator, including (but not limited to):

- assistance with scheduling of meetings

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- event management including procurement and financial administration
- preparation of agendas and collation of associated papers
- distribution of meeting papers
- development and distribution of communiqués following each of the meetings providing a summary of the meeting outcomes
- assist the facilitator with planning future meetings.

## Participation

- Feedback can be provided either through the meetings or via email.
- Papers will be provided to participants at least 3 days ahead of a meeting by email.
- The discussions and papers at the meeting will be subject to confidentiality agreements based on the principle that these are draft documents.
- Ideally the meetings should be face to face however the current COVID-19 restrictions affecting much of the state mean that it is likely that only on-line meetings will be permitted.
- Participants will have an opportunity to provide comments on papers after the meetings

## Values

*Connectivity stakeholder reference group members will represent core values*

The group is made up of a diverse range of community members and stakeholders. The stakeholders hold significant knowledge about the environment, as well as the cultural, social and economic features of local communities.

In order to ensure a functional and effective forum, values will be identified and adopted, guided by the following:

- a culture of respect and tolerance
- a commitment to innovation
- positivity and good humour
- a pledge of compassion
- a promise of inclusiveness
- a commitment to outcomes.

## Code of conduct

Meetings are to be cooperative forums promoting open and frank discussions. All such discussions are to be conducted in a courteous and professional manner.

All members are required to comply with the code of conduct below. This code may be reviewed and amended by Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group members as required:

**Aggressive, intimidating, disrespectful or bullying behaviour** will not be tolerated under any circumstances. Anyone who displays this behaviour will be removed immediately from the meeting and will not be able to participate in future meetings. This decision will be made by departmental staff or the facilitator.

**Transparency:** Key documents supporting the meetings will be published online – including the terms of reference, panel membership, key outcomes from meetings.

**Conflicts of interest:** Members are required to declare to the stakeholder reference group any conflicts of interest that may impact upon their judgement including political affiliations, professional or financial

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interests, personal experiences around the subject matter and any other factor that may be of relevance. These will be captured in the minutes of the meeting.

Potential conflicts may result in the need to enter into an agreement with the department about how to manage that conflict, or withdraw from discussion on a certain topic, or in extreme circumstances, to step down from the Member role.

**Accountability:** Members should behave in a manner which is fair and respectful of other members of the group, Department staff and external presenters.

Members must always be explicit when they are attending an event or meeting about whether they are speaking in their capacity as member of the stakeholder reference group or the capacity of another role that they hold, or expressing their own personal views as a public member. Members must not claim to speak on behalf of the stakeholder reference group unless this has been agreed by other members of the group.

**Responsiveness:** Members and support staff will actively respond to items raised and act on them in a timely manner.

**Attendance at meetings:** Members who cannot attend a meeting will need to notify the Department in advance of the alternate that will represent them at the meeting, and any perceived or actual conflicts of interest they may have.

**Support:** Members should have access to the support necessary to enable them to be involved and support informed decisions making. Members should communicate well in advance of meetings or activities with the stakeholder reference group and request any support.

**Respect:** Everyone should show respect for each other's roles and perspectives. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- members are expected to deal fairly, objectively, impartially and respectfully with all members of the group, DPIE Staff, staff of partner organisations/agencies and external presenters;
- attend meetings prepared to make a constructive contribution; read all papers provided in advance of the meeting, and be attentive during the meeting;
- be as open as possible about view points and actions, being prepared to explain these, and avoid defensiveness when responding to constructive challenge or input;
- allow everyone to take part without interruption, speaking over others or intimidation, respecting the contribution of others and, never being derogatory in speech or manner. Members should not use language which could be construed as discriminatory or offensive to others and should not use heated, emotional and value loaded language and behaviour;
- allow conversation to move forward, sticking to the point under discussion; and/or
- not influence or dominate the meetings for own purposes or the purpose of a group or organisation with whom a member is affiliated.

**Breach of Conduct:** Any member who is suspected of breaching the Code of Conduct may be required to stop participating in activity/ies or meeting/s while the matter is investigated.

## Meetings

Item	Details
Responsibility of members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attend connectivity stakeholder reference group meetings</li><li>• Provide advice to DPIE Water based on their background and experience</li><li>• Provide updates and information to the persons in their respective group and the regions they are representing</li></ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Members to notify secretariat of attendance or apology 3 days prior to meeting to assist with catering and room size requirements.</li> </ul>
Inappropriate behaviour	Aggressive, intimidating, disrespectful or bullying behaviour will not be tolerated under any circumstances. Anyone who displays this behaviour will be removed immediately from the meeting and will not be able to participate in future meetings. This decision will be made by departmental staff or the facilitator.
Frequency and location	It is expected that the panel will meet on 2 or 3 occasions either virtually or at a central location such as Sydney, Dubbo or Broken Hill prior to the draft Western Regional Water Strategy being published in the second half of 2021. On-line meetings may need to be arranged if COVID-19 restrictions are introduced.
Confidentiality	Information discussed at meetings that is sensitive or confidential must not be divulged outside membership except where agreed by the party/ies sharing confidential information.
Media authorisations	Members can refer to the outcomes of the meetings that have been published online. Members cannot speak publicly on behalf of the connectivity stakeholder reference group unless they have been nominated by the reference group as a nominated spokesperson and agreed by a quorum.  This includes any reference via social media or other channels.
Notices	Meetings will be advised via email from the secretariat and/or facilitator.  Proposed agenda/discussion items must be forwarded to Chair for consideration and inclusion 7 days prior.
Communiques	A communique will be developed following each of the meetings to provide a summary of the meeting outcomes. This will be published online after the meetings.  A set of high level minutes will be developed and provided to members after each meeting which will identify attendance, any conflicts of interest, key outcomes and actions. The minutes will not be published.
Travel Costs	DPIE Water will reimburse reasonable travel (airfares) and accommodation expenses to nominated stakeholder reference group members and/or organisations.
Sitting Fees	DPIE-Water will offer to pay sitting fees for members of the group that are not being reimbursed by other organisations to attend the meetings. Remuneration for members is up to \$220 per sitting day (note that public sector employees appointed to NSW government boards or committees do not receive remuneration).

## Membership

### *Who are members of the Connectivity Stakeholder Reference Group?*

The stakeholder reference group will be modelled on the First Flush Water User Reference Group with additional stakeholders who will bring expert and diverse experiences on basin connectivity matters.

The reference group will comprise of representatives from:

- Irrigation Industry Rep for Northern NSW tributaries
- Irrigation Industry Rep for Lower-Darling
- Irrigation Industry Rep for Barwon-Darling
- Irrigation industry rep for southern valleys
- Local Government Rep for Northern NSW tributaries
- Local Government Rep for Barwon-Darling

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- Local Government Rep for Lower-Darling
- Community representative from Menindee
- Conservation group representatives
- Office of the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder
- Murray Darling Basin Authority
- Indigenous group representatives:
  - Barkandji First Nation Rep
  - Gomeroi Native Title Applicants
  - Ngemba, Ngiyampaa, Wangaaypuwan and Wayilwan
  - NSW Aboriginal Land Council

Staff from DPIE, Water Infrastructure NSW and WaterNSW will also be attending meetings.