

## Update: temporary water restrictions on river and overland flows in the northern Basin

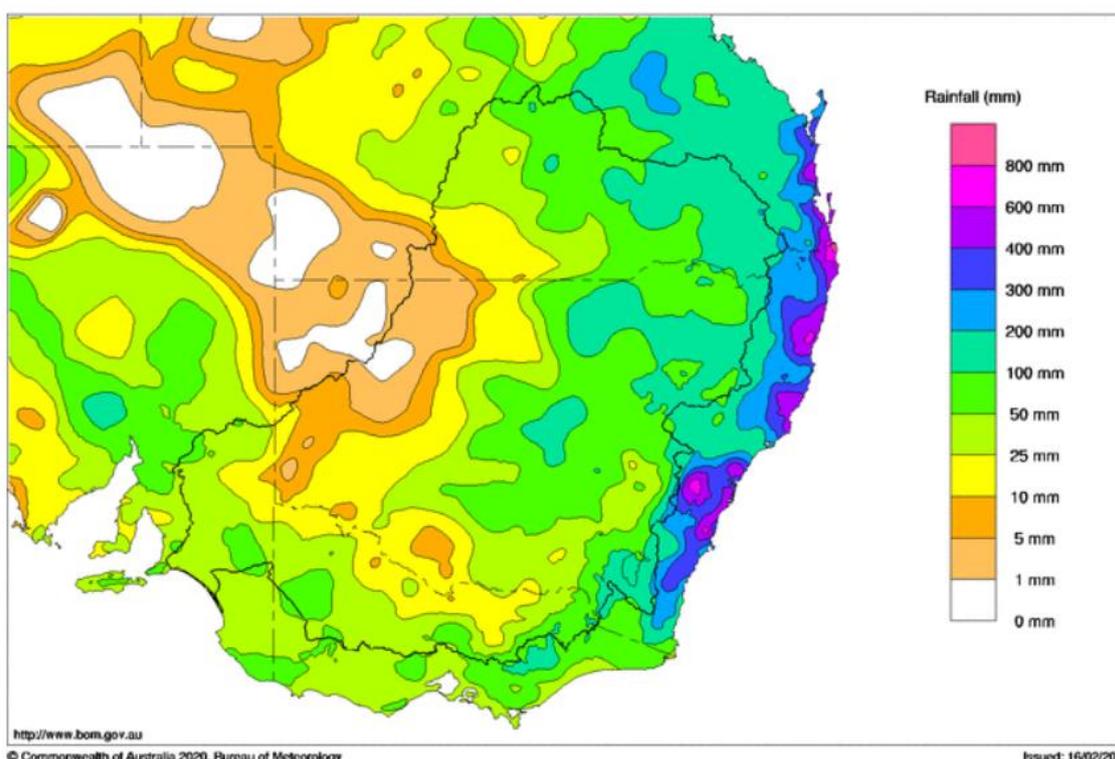
*An update on recent rainfall and flows in the northern NSW Murray–Darling Basin and the rationale for temporary restrictions on access*

### Overview

Widespread rain has fallen across the coastal and northern parts of NSW between 6 and 17 February 2020, resulting in some long-awaited inflows. This information sheet provides a brief update on conditions as at 17 February 2020, explains when and why temporary restrictions have been made, and summarises the current access arrangements across the northern NSW basin. This follows on from a previous update on the Department’s temporary water restrictions webpage [here](#).

The restrictions on river flow and floodplain harvesting access in the Northern NSW Basin are in effect until 28 February 2020 and apply to most access for commercial purposes. Some limited exemptions were in place for specified periods only, and these end on 18 February 2020. The only types of access allowable across the northern NSW basin are for highest priority needs: basic landholder rights, domestic and stock needs, town water supplies and high security access licences. In response to recent inflows in the Border rivers, access to regulated (high security) access licences in the regulated NSW Border Rivers is now allowed. The latest flow forecasts are available on the WaterNSW website: [waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates](http://waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates).

Murray-Darling Rainfall Totals (mm) 1st to 16th February 2020  
Australian Bureau of Meteorology



## Rationale for restrictions

The current restrictions are the most comprehensive protections to inflows ever applied by the NSW government to the northern NSW basin. It is the first time that floodplain harvesting access has been restricted and continues the widespread restrictions on take during this current drought which apply to all connected northern basin rivers in NSW. This reflects the severity of this unprecedented drought, the recommendations of a number of recent investigations, and changing community attitudes to water sharing.

As a result of these restrictions, the protected flows will 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. It will result in substantial benefits for fish health and the riverine environment, as well as the many communities and landholders who live along the river.

However, forecast flows are not yet sufficient to meet all downstream critical water needs. In the lower Darling River, high priority basic landholder rights, stock and domestic supplies, and environmental needs have not been met since 4 December 2018, when local temporary water restrictions were first applied.

The Department acknowledges that the decision to restrict access in the NSW Northern Basin has had a significant impact on those communities. Many farmers in this area have not had a winter crop for some years and most on-farm storages have been empty for some time.

Equally, the Department acknowledges the fish deaths at Menindee in the summer of 2018/19 were devastating. The Lower Darling remains at the highest level in terms of drought condition, with significant water quality issues along the river. Water carting continues in this region as it does in many others.

As the rainfall and river flows continue, the approach has been to provide for critical needs in the upstream catchments first, then if the forecast flows are sufficient to contribute to downstream catchments we continue to restrict until critical needs in these can be met. Once flow forecasting indicates no further downstream gains are likely, then restrictions will be progressively lifted.

It is for this reason that the restrictions remain in place. The department will continue to monitor the situation closely.

## Current restrictions

The weather over the last two weeks has resulted in some intense localised rainfall and runoff. In some cases, this has generated significant overland flow, leading to localised flooding.

In the early stages of the rainfall event, in response to these local issues, some exemptions to these widespread restrictions were applied. These were explained in a previous fact sheet and the details, including the reasons behind these difficult decisions, are on our website:

<https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/temporary-water-restrictions>

Access arrangements as at 18 February 2020 are summarised in Table 1 below.

Restrictions currently apply to unregulated river access and floodplain harvesting in all water sources in the northern NSW basin. Supplementary access and other uncontrolled flow access have not been announced in any northern NSW basin water source, apart from some limited access from 14 February in the Lower Gwydir Valley to water that would not have connected downstream to the Barwon River. General security access continues to be restricted in all northern basin regulated rivers, apart from the Gwydir if ordered from the dam.

The flows are now sufficiently large and widespread to allow access by high security licence holders in northern regulated rivers. High security access has a high priority under the NSW Water Management Act 2000, and the licensed volume is much smaller than that of other lower priority categories of licence. Access will provide much needed respite for water-dependent businesses and industries severely impacted by the drought, without substantially reducing flows downstream.

On 17 February 2020, we permitted access to high security allocations in the NSW Border Rivers regulated river, consistent with arrangements on the other northern regulated rivers. This is in response to inflows from 14 February which should flow all the way to the Barwon River at Mungindi and downstream.

## Forecasts

NSW water management agencies are working together to improve flow forecasting. Forecasts along the Barwon–Darling River are on the WaterNSW website here: [waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates](http://waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates). We continue to monitor rainfall and flows, and flow forecasts are updated regularly.

We are using these forecasts to determine the likely flow volumes that will reach downstream areas where we still need to meet critical needs. We are working to determine the volumes required at key downstream locations to meet these critical needs in the Barwon Darling and Menindee/Lower Darling systems. When flows are forecast to meet these critical downstream needs, the department will progressively lift restrictions in the upstream tributaries. As the rainfall events have unfolded, the forecasts are showing an increased likelihood of meeting downstream needs.

## Next steps and further information

The current order that temporarily restricts access to unregulated river and floodplain harvesting access licences in the northern basin applies until 28 February 2020. Most general security access is suspended by orders that apply until 30 June 2020, however these will also be reviewed subject to further inflows.

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)

# Northern Basin temporary water restrictions

Fact sheet | 17 February 2020



**Table 1.** Northern NSW basin access as at Tuesday, 18 February 2020

River system	Category	Can access?	Temporary Water Restriction - Expiry Date
Border Rivers	High Security	Yes	—
	General Security (A & B)	No	30 Jun 2020
	Unregulated rivers	No	28 Feb 2020
	Supplementary	No	By announcement
	Floodplain harvesting	No	28 Feb 2020
Gwydir	High Security	Yes	—
	General Security	No	—
	Unregulated rivers	No	30 June 2020
	Supplementary	Refer to WNSW	By announcement
	Floodplain harvesting	No	28 Feb 2020
Peel	High Security	Yes	—
	General Security	No	—
	Unregulated rivers	No	28 Feb 2020
	Uncontrolled Flows	No	By announcement
	Floodplain harvesting	N/A	
Upper Namoi	High Security	Yes	—
	General Security	No	30 Jun 2020
	Unregulated rivers	No	28 Feb 2020
	Uncontrolled Flows	No	By announcement
	Floodplain harvesting	No	28 Feb 2020
Lower Namoi	High Security	Yes	—
	General Security	No	30 Jun 2020
	Unregulated rivers	No	28 Feb 2020
	Supplementary	No	By announcement
	Floodplain harvesting	No	28 Feb 2020
Macquarie	High Security	Yes	—
	General Security	No	30 Jun 2020
	Unregulated rivers	No	28 Feb 2020
	Supplementary	No	By announcement
	Floodplain harvesting	No	28 Feb 2020
Barwon-Darling	A class	No	28 Feb 2020
	B class	No	28 Feb 2020
	C class	No	28 Feb 2020

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