

Update: temporary water restrictions on river and overland flows in the Barwon-Darling

Pumping from the Barwon Darling River below the Culgoa River junction for A, B, and C class access is currently restricted, as is floodplain harvesting along the full length of the Barwon-Darling Valley floodplain to ensure that northern Basin flows continue to be protected down to Lake Wetherell.

What is the Lake Wetherell flow target?

As at 4 March 2020 WaterNSW has forecast that if current access restrictions remain, 215 to 240 gigalitres (GL) could enter Lake Wetherell in the Menindee Lakes system. The forecast has increased as a result of further flows from Queensland which are expected to reach the Barwon-Darling from the Bokhara, Culgoa and Warrego systems.

This forecast significantly exceeds our original target of 60 to 70 GL, which was the minimum required to provide a single release down the Darling River and a small drought reserve in Lake Wetherell for Menindee town water supply and critical drought refuge in the Lake.

Given the increased flows now expected and the significant critical water shortage in the Lower Darling, we are now targeting 200 GL inflows into Lake Wetherell. This revised target will provide sufficient water to ensure critical needs along the Darling River for the next 12 months. This is consistent with the approach taken for storage management in the northern upstream tributaries, where restrictions were not fully lifted until a year's worth of supply for critical needs was assured in the dams and sufficient flows had passed to contribute downstream to the Barwon-Darling.

Next steps

The department intends to progressively lift restrictions along the Barwon-Darling once the required flows to meet the Lake Wetherell target are assured. On current forecast estimates of flows into Lake Wetherell and pump capacities downstream of Culgoa, if all pumping was permitted today the target of 200 GL may not be achievable. It is anticipated that the pumping restriction could be lifted by around 15 March 2020 without compromising the new target.

If forecasts increase (e.g. due to additional contributions from the current rainfall event) and it is confidently predicted that the 200 GL target will be met sooner, then the pumping restrictions may be lifted before this estimated date. The forecasts are constantly reviewed to determine when the pumping and floodplain harvesting components of the restrictions could be lifted.

It is expected that the protected flows will begin to reach Lake Wetherell from 7 March, but will not reach the target volume until several weeks later.

WaterNSW and the department are working with stakeholders and other agencies to determine how releases from Lake Wetherell will be managed to reduce water quality and fish impacts, as well as provide ongoing security for critical water needs.

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