

The Barwon-Darling and Lower Darling Critical Water Advisory Panel held its fifth meeting on 19 February 2019.

The Barwon-Darling and Lower Darling Critical Water Advisory Panel was established in response to extended dry conditions in this river system. Further information on the function and membership of critical water advisory panels can be found in the Fact Sheet.

https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0013/203125/critical-water-advisory-panels-fact-sheet.pdf

A summary of the meeting outcomes is provided below.

Drought situation update

- Minimal inflows to the northern systems and to the Barwon-Darling and Lower Darling Rivers
- Bourke has about 6 weeks supply remaining in its weir pool and work is underway to install an emergency bore
- Release of Commonwealth and NSW environmental water in the northern valleys to the Barwon-Darling is being considered by governments with regard to timing and water quality impacts
- Walgett and Wilcannia have approval for weir upgrades but this work will not assist the current drought situation. Bore water is available in these towns.
- Copi Hollow has sufficient supply for Broken Hill until late April, and the pipeline from the Murray should be on line by early April
- 18 GL remains in Lake Wetherell and this can be used to top up supply to Menindee, however, Lake Wetherell will be dry by September
- Releases have ceased over Weir 32 on the Lower Darling
- Water in the pools behind the block banks below Menindee Lakes should last for 6 months, although quality is poor.

The key issue will be managing the next inflows, as water quality issues (particularly high salt levels) are likely to be significant if inflows are low. Agencies are working closely together on the processes for managing delivery of water and ameliorating water quality impacts as much as possible.

The community drought meetings

To ensure that there is greater understanding of local issues to inform the Critical Water Advisory Panel, the Department of Industry and WaterNSW held a series of public meetings with communities in critical drought affected river systems between 6 and 14 February 2019. Copies of the presentations and a report on the key issues raised at the meetings are available from the Department of Industry website *Information sessions: drought outlook and water availability* at <https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/update/information-sessions>.

The key issues raised and corresponding actions for the Department of Industry and WaterNSW from the Walgett and Pooncarie community meetings are:

- Local Government to be represented on the Panels – this has been initiated with Local Councils represented through the Joint Organisation of Councils. Representatives attended this panel meeting
- provide dedicated support for local Councils at risk – James McTavish has been appointed by the NSW Government as the Regional Water Supply Coordinator to work directly with Councils on their water supply and water quality issues.
- provide further information on the drought and the impacts on water supplies through a range of media.

- work with Office of Environment and Heritage to provide more information on the purpose and timing of environmental releases
- assess the impact of the drought on groundwater, including recharge, and come back to further community meetings in April/May with this information
- ensure further community consultation occurs on floodplain harvesting policy and its implementation
- provide information on the purpose of the temporary water restrictions applied in some of the river systems, such as the Lower Darling (this information is available from the Department of Industry - Water website at <https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/temporary-water-restrictions>)
- work with NSW Health to ensure information is provided on the water quality monitoring results for Walgett's groundwater supply, but also provide information to the public more widely on the impacts of artesian water with higher sodium levels on town water supplies and community health.
- protect future flows into the Barwon-Darling and Lower Darling for critical human and environmental needs and water quality.

An action plan is to be developed to ensure that the issues raised are progressed.

Water carting for domestic supplies

The NSW Government provides assistance to Councils for emergency water caring of domestic water for towns and villages. The Government is also providing financial assistance to the local councils to cart water for rural residents that are normally supplied from regulated rivers provided if they do not have access to alternative supplies. However some landholders do not have sufficient tank capacity to store the carted water. The Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator will work with Lower Darling Councils to assess the extent of the problem and options.

There also needs to be a standard process for advising those receiving carted water that the water may no longer be classified as potable if approved water carting trucks are not used. The water's potability may also be impacted by the landholder's storage. The Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator will work with Councils and NSW Health on appropriate advice for the recipients of carted water.

Water for firefighting purposes

Some Councils are concerned that they may not have sufficient water for firefighting purposes. The Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator is addressing this with the NSW Rural Fire Service and through the Far West Regional Emergency Management Committee.

Assistance for those with medical conditions

The NSW Government is working with Walgett Shire Council to ensure that all residents have access to a safe and reliable water supply, and the provision of information and advice to the community.

Alerts for systems impacted by blue-green algae

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the health risks of contact with blue-green algae are not widely understood, particularly by recreational water users. It is not possible to sign-post whole stretches of rivers that are impacted by blue-green algae. Algal alerts are issued on WaterNSW's websites but a broader community campaign will be explored to explain that water affected by blue-green algae should not be used for recreational purposes. Agencies to work on linking of information and a broader campaign.

Restrictions on next system inflows

The application of restrictions (embargoes) for the next system inflows depends on the size and timing of the inflow event. While first flush protection rules are being developed as part of the Barwon-Darling water sharing plan, in the interim, the Panel will convene at short notice if rainfall occurs or is forecast and an inflow event is possible.

Criteria for allocating water between high priority needs

The Department of Industry is developing a framework that can assist the Critical Water Advisory Panel assess water supply options and priorities if conditions continue to deteriorate. A key focus is identifying the critical survival needs for towns, industry and the environment. The broad considerations that will be taken into account when allocating water when river systems are at critically low levels include:

- Priorities under the *Water Management Act 2000*, including meeting critical human water needs.
- Connectivity with other river valleys
- Ability to deliver water without incurring excessive losses
- Equity of access between groups of similar priority users.

Water quality issues

The Extreme Events Policy released in October 2018 provides for Critical Water Advisory Panels to be established for both critical drought situations and for extreme water quality events. It was agreed that the existing Panels would need to consider both issues given the interconnection between water flows and water quality. Further consideration will be given to a broader approach for water quality management across the state.

Agencies Present

Department of Industry - Water

WaterNSW

NSW EPA

DPI Agriculture

DPI Fisheries

Rural Assistance Authority

Office of Environment and Heritage

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Local Land Services

Far South West Joint Organisation of Councils

Far North West Organisation of Councils

Next Meeting

The next Panel meeting is likely to be convened in April / May 2019, coinciding with further community engagement. If conditions change, an earlier meeting may be arranged at short notice.