

Barwon-Darling CAG – March 2026

Held: Thursday 26 March 2026 – 11:45am to 3:00pm

At: Back O Bourke Information Exhibition Centre - Kidman Way, Bourke, New South Wales, 2840

Meeting focus: provide updates on a range of Water Group water infrastructure, policy and planning projects being delivered across the Barwon-Darling region or statewide.

Chaired by: Peter Hansen

Attendees

NSW Department Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water:

- Peter Hansen, Engagement Team, Water Group - meeting facilitator
- Peter Hyde, Director Inland Water Planning, Water Group
- Veronica Silberschneider, Acting/Director Planning Implementation (online)
- David Andersen, Manager Metering Implementation (online)

External stakeholders:

- Barwon-Darling CAG members, Joe Robinson (Chair)
- WaterNSW

Meeting notes

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- **Connectivity panel recommendations and water management reforms:** An update on the recommendations from the Connectivity Expert Panel was presented, focusing on proposed changes to water sharing rules, resumption of flow, and the impacts on the Barwon-Darling and northern valleys, including legal, economic, and environmental considerations.
 - **Panel recommendations:** The Connectivity Expert Panel's recommendations, include new rules for managing water during non-dry, transition, and dry periods, such as end-of-system flow targets, resumption of flow rules, and environmental water allowances. The recommendations aim to improve river connectivity, particularly benefiting the Barwon-Darling, and were developed in response to events like fish

deaths and stakeholder input. The panel's recommendations are not government policy. The government is currently presenting the analysis to stakeholders, seeking feedback on both the recommendations and the modelling approach.

- **Rule modelling and impacts:** The modelling of different rule scenarios, including high security accounts and translucency rules, and their effects on water users and river flows was described. The high security account scenario showed significant impacts on general security users, while translucency rules had a lesser effect. The modelling also assessed the combined impact of multiple rules, showing both benefits for downstream flows and economic costs.
- **Legal Risks:** The meeting discussed the legal authority under the Water Management Act to implement these changes, the triggering of compensation clauses, and the associated risks of court cases and significant government expenditure. Legal advice has been sought, and the potential for cabinet-level decisions was acknowledged due to the scale of potential compensation involved.
- **Stakeholder consultation and next steps:** Targeted consultations is planned with irrigator groups, environmental groups, and inter-agency committees, aiming to finalise the reforms by December. The importance of considering previous reforms and current river connectivity achievements was emphasised, with input from various stakeholders on balancing environmental and economic outcomes.
- **Section 324 Temporary Water Restrictions in the Northern Basin:** The rationale, triggers, and operational details of impending Section 324 temporary water restrictions for the Northern Basin was presented, addressing questions about implementation, exemptions, and the relationship to existing water sharing plans.
 - **Trigger and rationale for restrictions:** Section 324 restrictions will be triggered when active storage in the Upper Menindee Lakes falls below 250 gegalitres, based on modelling to ensure 12 months of critical supply. The trigger accounts for infrastructure issues and the need for higher minimum releases to maintain water quality and prevent fish deaths.
 - **Public interest and exemptions:** The restrictions are justified on grounds of water shortage, public health, and environmental protection. Exemptions include basic landholder rights, certain types of runoff, and water for metering equipment testing. The importance of keeping records for compliance was emphasised. Relaxation triggers for lifting restrictions was outlined.

- **Interaction with Water Sharing Plans:** While some rules are already embedded in the Barwon-Darling water sharing plan, Section 324 is used to ensure consistency across valleys, especially where plan amendments are pending. The order will be lifted when storage exceeds 250 gigalitres or after a set period, with flow-based relaxation triggers for supplementary and floodplain harvesting access.
- **Carp Management:** Participants raised concerns about carp proliferation and its impact on water quality and native fish. The department confirmed that carp management is primarily a Commonwealth issue, with the national herpesvirus program under review until 2028, and encouraged submissions to the Basin Plan Review to highlight local concerns.
- **Metering compliance works classification:** An update on metering compliance in the Barwon-Darling, discussed the new works classification process, and addressed questions about compliance status, communication, and the process for declaring works as not taking water.
 - **Compliance statistics and classification changes:** The current compliance rates for metering in the Barwon-Darling, noting that a significant proportion of works are exempt or could become compliant through proper classification. The term 'inactive' has been replaced with 'approval holder declared not taking' and holders are encouraged to update their status in the WaterNSW portal.
 - **Legal obligations:** Questions were raised about the legal status of non-compliant works, especially for holders with no intention to use their storages. Under current regulations, a metering condition applies unless an exemption is declared, and NRAR may take compliance action. The department committed to directly contacting holders of non-compliant storages to provide guidance (action noted below).
 - **Process for updating compliance and support:** The process for declaring works as not taking is free until the end of June, after which a fee applies. The department and WaterNSW will provide support, including direct outreach, public register updates, and face-to-face sessions to help holders understand and update their compliance status.
 - **Implications for Floodplain Harvesting Licences:** It was clarified that even if a licence is unlikely to be used, holders must take action to declare non-use to avoid being counted as non-compliant. The group discussed the impact of non-compliance statistics on the valley's reputation and the need for clear communication to all licence holders.

- **Meter accuracy testing and calibration initiatives:** The ongoing and planned initiatives for electronic testing of large mag flow meters in the Barwon-Darling, including pilot results, future steps, and the relationship to broader calibration and compliance projects was provided.
 - **Electronic testing program:** The multi-step program for electronic testing of mag flow meters was described, including initial manufacturer engagement, preliminary and comprehensive electronic testing, and plans for in-situ and off-site verification. The aim is to provide a practical, less resource-intensive alternative to volumetric testing at the five-year maintenance mark.
 - **Pilot results and next steps:** Preliminary testing of 13 meters showed that most were accurate, with one failure sent back to the manufacturer. The program will expand to all large mag flow meters in the region, with the goal of supporting compliance and informing the pump calibration project.

Actions:

- **Distribution of meeting presentations:** Send a PDF version of presentations to CAG members and upload the presentation to the Water website.
- **Follow-up on Section 324 Restriction applicability:** Confirm whether the section 324 restriction applies to water being protected as opposed to extracted for B&C class licences, specifically for environmental water such as CEWO or the department r, and report back to the CAG.
- **Clarification of compliance status for floodplain harvesting storages:** Contact each approval holder of the 29 storages currently marked as non-compliant to inform them of their status and provide instructions on how to update their classification to 'approval holder declared not taking' if appropriate.
- **Provision of compliance status information:** Send a mail-out to every works approval holder through WaterNSW detailing the current classification status of all their works and instructions for updating their compliance status if necessary.
- **Metering accuracy testing results:** Share the results of the ongoing electronic metering accuracy testing, including any findings relevant to the calibration project, with the CAG once available.

