

Border Rivers CAG meeting notes – March 2026

Held: Thursday 19 March 2026 – 1:00pm to 4:00pm (QLD time. NSW – fwd 1 hour)

At: Gateway To Training - 15-21 Russell Street, Goondiwindi, Queensland, 4390

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

Chaired by: Peter Hansen

Attendees

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

- Peter Hansen, Engagement Team, Water Group - meeting facilitator
- Amber McSwiney, Senior Communications and Engagement Advisor
- Therese Hulme, Manager Northern Basin Connectivity
- Veronica Silberschneider, Implementation Coordinator (online)
- Wayne Andrews, Senior Project Officer Engagement

External stakeholders:

- Border Rivers CAG members, John Appleby (Chair)
- WaterNSW

Meeting notes

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- **Northern Basin Connectivity program and expert panel recommendations:** An overview of the Northern Basin Connectivity Program was presented, detailing the expert panel's recommendations for improving river connectivity, the modelling of various rule changes, and the anticipated impacts on water flows, diversions, and regional economies, with active discussion and questions from participants.
 - **Program objectives:** It was explained that the Northern Basin Connectivity Program aims to improve flows from tributary valleys into the Barwon-Darling system, particularly during dry periods, by considering rule changes in water sharing plans.
 - **Expert panel recommendations:** The expert panel recommended setting inter-system flow targets in tributary valleys to maintain base flows during non-dry times, implementing extended resumption of flow rules during dry periods, and establishing a connectivity environmental water allowance for strategic dam releases. These measures are intended to enhance ecosystem resilience, support fish passage, and protect critical human and environmental needs. The panel's recommendations are not government policy.

- **Modelling and impact analysis:** The modelling of various rule change scenarios, including the use of high security accounts and translucency releases for dam operations was explained. The analysis showed that while certain approaches (e.g. high security accounts) yield greater connectivity benefits, they also result in larger reductions in water diversions, with significant economic impacts on water users and regional communities.
- **Intergovernmental coordination:** Participants discussed the complexities of implementing rule changes across state boundaries, noting that the Border Rivers Commission manages assets but not licensing, and that both New South Wales and Queensland governments must agree to amend the Intergovernmental Agreement. Historical reluctance from Queensland to share water for downstream benefit was highlighted as a challenge.
- **Consultation and next steps:** The panel's recommendations are not yet government policy, further analysis and stakeholder consultation will occur before any changes to water sharing plans are finalised. The Minister for Water, with concurrence from the Minister for Environment, will ultimately decide on the adoption of new rules, and additional consultation sessions are planned for later in the year.
- **Minimum inflows project and climate risk assessment:** The Minimum Inflows Project was outlined including the review of methods for setting dam inflow reserves to ensure town and environmental water supply under increasingly variable and dry climate scenarios, with discussion of historical drought management, use of extended climate data, and the endorsement of the new method by the Office of Chief Scientist and Engineer.
 - **Project objectives and drought experience:** The project aims to improve the capacity to manage water availability during dry periods by reviewing and potentially adjusting storage reserves for high-priority needs. Discussion highlighted the challenges faced during the Millennium and Tinderbox droughts, including critical water shortages for towns, and the need for coordinated releases between New South Wales and Queensland.
 - **Climate data and risk analysis:** The department incorporated paleo-stochastic data, such as tree rings and ice cores, to extend the climate record and better understand long-term variability and drought risk. This analysis revealed that future dry periods could be more frequent and severe, prompting the need to reassess reserve volumes and risk thresholds for essential water supply.
 - **Method review and stakeholder engagement:** The new method for setting minimum inflow reserves was independently reviewed and endorsed by the Office of Chief Scientist and Engineer, with recommendations largely accepted. The department is conducting modelling and impact analysis for the 3 northern valleys, with results and further consultation planned taking into account stakeholder requests for timing to avoid overlap with other major submissions.
 - **Consideration of population growth and climate models:** Regional population growth projections are factored into the analysis, and that the official dataset (NARClIM) is used, which incorporates multiple climate scenarios and future inflow risks.

- **Temporary water restrictions and Menindee Lakes management:** The rationale, triggers, and operational details was explained of a proposed Section 324 temporary water restrictions in the Northern Basin, focusing on the 250 gigalitre active storage threshold for Menindee Lakes, the associated relaxation triggers, and the ongoing review of Menindee operations in collaboration with the MDBA.
 - **Section 324 restrictions rationale and triggers:** Section 324 restrictions are enacted to safeguard critical human and environmental needs when Menindee Lakes' active storage falls below 250 gigalitres, the threshold is set due to infrastructure constraints and water quality management needs. Relaxation triggers for lifting restrictions are based on actual measured flows at key gauges, and the restrictions are lifted when storage recovers or by a set date.
 - **Operational details and exemptions:** The restrictions apply to various licence categories, with exemptions for basic landholder rights, rainfall runoff, and certain operational uses.
 - **Menindee Operations review and fish passage:** An update was provided on the review of Menindee Lakes operations, led by the MDBA with input from NSW, focusing on infrastructure improvements (notably fish passage), the need for coordinated operating rules, and the challenge of balancing water quality, evaporation losses, and interjurisdictional interests.
 - **Evaporation losses and efficiency concerns:** Estimated annual evaporation losses from Menindee Lakes at around 400 gigalitres, highlighting the importance of operational efficiency and the limitations of simply 'adding water' as a long-term solution for environmental and supply objectives.
- **Metering implementation and compliance updates:** Updates on metering implementation in the Border Rivers was presented, explaining compliance rates, new classification options for works, the process for declaring works as not taking water, and the implications for users, with clarification of rules for different pump sizes and licence categories.
 - **Metering compliance categories and Progress:** The breakdown of metering requirements by licence size was explained, with users above 100 megalitres requiring full compliance, and smaller users having self-installation options. Compliance rates differ depending on whether measured by entitlement or by number of works, and users are encouraged to update their records to reflect actual on-ground infrastructure.
 - **Classification and exemption processes:** The new WaterNSW customer portal allows users to classify works as constructed, not taking water, or not constructed, which can remove unnecessary metering obligations. There is currently no fee for reclassification, but a small fee will apply in future pricing determinations.
 - **Floodplain harvesting and small user requirements:** Floodplain harvesting storages are tracked separately, with most now metered or declared inactive. Small water users (15–100 megalitres) have until December 2027 or their next approval renewal to install meters and can self-install approved devices and use guidance materials.

- **Rules for pump sizes and special circumstances:** Pumps below 100 millimetres are generally exempt from metering, regardless of entitlement size, unless specific water sharing plan rules require metering during certain conditions (e.g., cease to pump events). Users are advised to consult their specific plan rules for compliance.
- **Water Sharing Plan amendments and wetlands consultation:** Recent and upcoming amendments to water sharing plans, including legal vetting of clauses for connectivity improvements and floodplain harvesting was outlined. Further public consultation on wetlands mapping and management, with be conducted for stakeholders who have raised concerns.
 - **Legal amendments and floodplain harvesting:** Recent amendments to water sharing plans, including provisions for future connectivity improvements and adjustments to Menindee Storage Reserve volumes, have been legally vetted and drafted by the department's legal team.
 - **Wetlands mapping and stakeholder engagement:** Public consultation on wetlands mapping and management will occur later in the year, with efforts to improve mapping resolution and direct communication with stakeholders who have previously submitted concerns, ensuring alignment with broader valley management approaches.

Actions:

- **Floodplain harvesting relaxation trigger clarification:** Check and confirm whether the 3,000 megalitres per day relaxation trigger at Mungindi Gauge for floodplain harvesting in the Border Rivers Water Sharing Plan is based on forecast or actual flows and communicate the finding to the group.
- **Wetland consultations:** Further public consultation on wetlands mapping and management with be conducted for stakeholders who have raised concerns.
- **Provision of slide deck to attendees:** Send the complete slide deck from the meeting to attendees, ensuring it is the latest version.