Coastal-Hunter CAG – April 2026

Held: Wednesday 22 April 2026 – 12noon to 2:00pm

At: Tocal Agricultural Centre, 815 Tocal Road, Tocal, New South Wales, 2421

Meeting focus: provide updates on a range of Water Group water infrastructure, policy and planning projects being delivered across the Coastal-Hunter 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
- Jane Blakeney, Communications Manager Water
- David Andersen, Manager Metering Implementation
- Danielle Doughty, Manager Regional Coastal Planning
- Simon Ward, Water Planner, Coastal and Groundwater Planning

External stakeholders:

- Coastal-Hunter CAG members, Shane Gee (chair)
- WaterNSW

Meeting notes

- **Coastal water metering compliance and exemptions:** Update provided on coastal water metering rules, compliance deadlines, exemptions, and the classification of works, clarifying obligations for different entitlement sizes and addressing practical concerns from water users.
    - **Metering rules and deadlines:** Metering requirements are based on the size of water entitlements and works approvals. Those with more than 100 megalitres must be compliant by 1 December 2026, including installation of AS4747 compliant meters by a DQP and telemetry. Users with 15–100 megalitres have until 1 December 2027 or their works approval expiry, whichever is later, and can self-install meters. Entitlements below 15 megalitres are exempt from metering.
    - **Works classification and exemptions:** Classifying works as 'non-taking' or 'basic landholder rights only', is exempt from metering. The classification is available in the Public Water Register, and users are encouraged to declare works inactive before the end of the year, with correspondence to coastal users scheduled for June. Conditions apply, such as not taking water from classified works.
    - **Compliance rates and communications:** Current compliance rates are low on the coast (about 5%), with higher rates inland. Outreach efforts include education campaigns, field days, and targeted stakeholder engagement, with NRAR and Water NSW sending letters and conducting site visits, especially for users with over 100 megalitres.
    - **Concerns:** Participants raised concerns about the financial burden of compliance, especially for smaller water users and those with multiple meters for small takes. The department acknowledged these issues and committed to providing information on lower-cost meters and sharing it with the group. The department also advised users to review their entitlements and consider adjusting them if their actual water use is much lower than their entitlement (action).
    - **Reporting and rule amendments:** Upcoming amendments to reporting obligations were discussed, clarifying that reporting should be based on installed metering and telemetry, not just what is required. This change aims to ensure that users who have not installed compliant meters face more stringent reporting requirements, aligning obligations with actual infrastructure.
- **Hunter and Patterson water sharing plan merger:** The department provided an update on the proposed merger of the Hunter and Patterson regulated water sharing plans, explaining the process, and stakeholder engagement, with questions from attendees about potential changes and consultation timelines.
    - **Merger process and legal framework:** Under Section 45A1 of the *Water Management Act*, the minister can consolidate water management plans by repealing one and amending

another. The proposal is to repeal the Hunter plan and amend the Patterson plan to include Hunter provisions, renaming it accordingly. The merger is administrative and does not change current rules or operations. The merger will not affect existing rules or water operations, only extending the Hunter plan's lifespan to match Patterson's (until 2029). Editorial changes will clarify plan-specific clauses.

  - **Replacement plan timeline and review:** The replacement plan process involves internal reviews around year 5, followed by an independent Natural Resources Commission (NRC) review, stakeholder consultation, public exhibition, and ministerial approval. The timeline assumes the merged plan will be replaced in 2029, with preliminary work already started for the Hunter plan.
  - **Communication:** The department will inform all impacted parties of decisions and developments via email, postal mail, media, and social channels. Stakeholder input is encouraged throughout the process, with NRC seeking feedback for their audit and review, and submissions feeding into plan development.

- **Minimum Inflow project:** The department provided and update on the minimum inflow project, which aims to improve water management during droughts by updating inflow calculations using extensive climate data, with implementation for Hunter and Patterson scheduled around 2027 and ongoing consultation with stakeholders.
  - **Project objectives and scope:** The minimum inflow project reviews how minimum inflows into regulated dams are calculated to ensure critical needs are met during severe droughts. It is being rolled out in northern and southern basins, with Hunter and Patterson scheduled for review in 2027. Each basin is assessed individually based on its critical needs and storage capacity.
  - **Methodology and climate data:** The project uses paleostochastic data spanning over 10,000 years and forward-looking climate models (NARCliM 2.0 dataset) to better estimate inflow variability and drought risk. This approach replaces reliance on historical data, providing a more robust framework for managing water availability under changing climate conditions.
  - **Stakeholder engagement:** Consultation and discussions for Hunter and Patterson will begin in 2027. Stakeholder input is critical, and the department will provide updates and seek feedback as the project progresses.
  - **Impact on Water Sharing Plans:** The updated inflow calculations will inform future water sharing plan replacements, aiming to reduce emergency drought measures and improve certainty for water users. Questions from attendees addressed the integration of climate data and its effect on system flows. The department confirmed that inflows are the primary focus for now.

- **Water Licence trading and compliance:** The department answered questions on water licence trading, clarifying that both buyers and sellers must comply with metering rules, and explained the transition from 'inactive' works to works classification for compliance and trading purposes.
    - **Trading rules and compliance:** Access licence dealing principles are being updated to require both buyers and sellers to comply with metering rules. If a trade increases a user's entitlement above exemption thresholds, metering obligations apply. The purchaser will bear compliance responsibility under new rules.
    - **Works classification for trading:** The term 'inactive' has been replaced with works classification, such as 'landholder declared not taking', which allows trading from compliant works without a meter, provided conditions are met and no water is taken.
- **Guidance on Size-Based Exemptions and works notification:** Information was provided on the process for size-based exemptions and works notification, explaining how users can update records for smaller installed pumps to ensure compliance and exemption from metering, with free notification available via Water NSW.
    - **Notification process:** Users who have installed smaller pumps than their works approval allows can notify Water NSW free of charge (for now), updating records to reflect the actual installed size and automatically qualifying for size-based exemptions.
    - **Multiple pumps and exemption:** For works approvals with multiple pumps, all installed pumps must be below the exemption threshold to qualify. Clarification was provided on the order of precedence between size-based exemptions and works classification, with guidance to start with size-based criteria.
- **Return flow credit licensing Policy:** A question was asked about licensing policy for return flow credits. The department will follow up, noting its significance for industry members and ongoing review by the Minister.
    - **Policy status:** The issue of licensing outflows and receiving credit for return flows was discussed. The department confirming this is under review and will be followed up (action).
- **Coastal sustainable extraction project update:** An update was provided on the coastal sustainable extraction project, noting its expansion to statewide scope and ongoing trials in Richmond and Clyde, with anticipated results and communications in 2028.
    - **Project expansion and timeline:** The sustainable extraction project has grown from a coastal focus to statewide coverage, including both regulated and unregulated sectors. Trials are planned for Richmond and Clyde, with broader implementation expected by 2028.
    - **Communication:** The department will conduct communications and outreach on the North Coast and other regions as the project progresses, ensuring water users are informed about expected changes and trial outcomes.
- **North Coast Water Sharing Plan replacements:** An update was provided on the upcoming water sharing plan replacements for North Coast regions, including Nambucca, MacLeay, Clarence, and

Brunswick, with public exhibition planned for August for Brunswick and further replacements by 2028.

- **Replacement schedule:** Water sharing plans for Nambucca, MacLeay, Clarence, and Brunswick are scheduled for public exhibition from August, with Clyde, Deua, Tuross, Snowy, and coastal groundwater plans to follow by 2028.
- **Communication:** The department will use letters, emails, social media, and local radio advertising to inform water licence holders and the broader community about public exhibitions and plan replacements.

Actions:

- **Return flow:** Provide an update on the return flow credit/licensing policy question, including its current status with the Minister.
- **Metering costs:** Provide a list on available patent-approved meters and their costs, including options for lower-cost meters suitable for smaller coastal water users, and share this information with the group.
- **Santos Pipeline consultation:** Investigate whether Santos has consulted with the department regarding their pipeline project and its potential impact on Hunter Valley flood mitigation scheme works, and report back to the group.

Responses:

Return flow
Late last year the department implemented a change to the Water Management (General) Regulation 2025 to specify that return flows apply in the NSW Southern Basin, as agreed through development of the Prerequisite Policy Measures. The department has also been progressing a broader piece of work considering whether recommendations could be made about where return flow rules could apply more widely and under what circumstance. This work is still under development and has been impacted by other priorities. Stakeholders would be consulted on any proposed changes to help inform any decisions, once the work is more progressed.
Metering costs
A lot of pricing information for meters is not available online for meter manufacturers and requires the inquirer to seek a quote which will depend on individual circumstances. Water Group has prepared a summary of metering technologies which are pattern approved, who the manufacturers are and their contact details. Pattern Approved Meter Information

Santos Pipeline consultation
The Hunter Valley Flood Mitigation Scheme (HVFMS) has only recently been contacted by Santos to discuss approvals needed for pipeline construction works interacting with assets in the Lower and Upper Hunter. The HVFMS will be in further discussions with Santos moving forward and will review applications when received.