

Gwydir CAG afternoon session – March 2026

Held: Tuesday 17 March 2026 – 1:00pm to 4:30pm

At: Social Co House - 167 Balo Street, Moree, New South Wales, 2400

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

Chaired by: Peter Hansen

Attendees

NSW DCCEEW:

- Peter Hansen, Engagement Team, Water Group - meeting facilitator
- Amber McSwiney, Senior Communications and Engagement Advisor
- Peter Hyde, Director Inland Water Planning
- Therese Hulme, Manager Northern Basin Connectivity (online)
- Allan Raine, Director Planning Implementation
- Wayne Andrews, Senior Project Officer Engagement
- Thomas Walters, Hydrogeologist, Groundwater Management and Science, Water Science (online)
- Cate Barrett, Lead Hydrogeologist, Groundwater Management and Science, Water Science (online)

External stakeholders:

- Gwydir CAG members, Nick Gillingham (Chair)
- WaterNSW, Tracey Lawson, Ramona Nica

Meeting notes

Meeting notes:

- **Lower Gwydir groundwater source status update:** An update on the Lower Gwydir groundwater source, covering aquifer characteristics, monitoring, recharge processes, extraction trends, and temporary trade rules was presented.
 - **Aquifer structure and monitoring:** The Lower Gwydir groundwater source consists of an alluvial deposit with an unconfined aquifer, an aquitard, and a deeper semi-confined aquifer. There are approximately 1,200 basic landholder rights bores, 400 production bores, and 40 local water utility bores, with extraction concentrated between Moree and Ashley. Monitoring is conducted via 123 bores at 58 sites, with 19 telemetered, and data is available on the WaterNSW website.
 - **Rainfall and recharge trends:** Historical rainfall trends data was presenting, highlighting periods of drought and the impact on groundwater recharge. The recharge is primarily from river and flood events, with infiltration rates affected by soil type. The Bureau of Meteorology forecast for March to May indicated below-average rainfall, suggesting limited recharge in the near term.
 - **Groundwater level analysis:** Hydrographs from various sections (Palamalawa, Roydon, Moore, Ashley, Briggan, Gingham) were reviewed, showing generally stable groundwater levels in most areas, with recovery observed since 2021 following previous declines during droughts. Areas with significant pumping, such as between Ashley and Moree, showed more pronounced drawdowns and subsequent recoveries.
 - **Temporary trade (71T) assessment and rules:** The framework for temporary trades (71T), including criteria for allowable drawdown in unconfined and semi-confined aquifers was described. The rules limit additional drawdown to 10% of total available drawdown (TAD) above the base for unconfined aquifers (max 2m) and 40% at 200m for semi-confined aquifers, with further restrictions at third-party bores and surface water sources. There is an active market with 40–80 trades per year, and trade volumes increase during droughts.
 - **MDBA SDL risk and stakeholder consultation:** In response to a question about the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) identifying the Lower Gwydir as an SDL (Sustainable Diversion Limit) area at risk, it was clarified that discussions with MDBA are ongoing to specify the risk area, which is mainly between Moree and Ashley. The department is considering whether SDL mechanisms or other management tools are appropriate for small areas, and ongoing consultation with stakeholders was agreed.
 - **Water use by towns and landholders:** Moree Plains Shire Council inquired about the proportion of groundwater used for town supply versus high security and general licences in the Ashley-Moree area. Council bores supply a significant portion of town water, but the main

drawdown is from high security licences. The exact split was not available during the meeting, and Water Group agreed to follow up (action).

- **Northern Basin Connectivity and water sharing plan amendments:** The Northern Basin Connectivity Project, including modelling of panel recommendations, minimum inflows, water sharing plan remakes, and the implications for water users, with extensive discussion and questions from attendees regarding fairness, economic impacts, and operational details was discussed.
 - **Connectivity project objectives and modelling:** The aim of the project is to improve river connectivity between the Barwon-Darling and tributaries, enhance transparency, and reduce reliance on temporary water restrictions. Modelling included end-of-system flow targets, resumption of flow rules, and environmental water allowances (EWA
 - **Panel recommendations and stakeholder concerns:** The panel recommended resumption of flow targets, extended dry period rules, and a 14-day small fresh event. Stakeholders raised concerns about the fairness of the proposed rules, particularly the disproportionate impact on upstream irrigators, and suggested alternative approaches such as proportional reductions similar to Queensland's 10% rule. These are panel recommendations, not government policy, and final decisions rest with ministers.
 - **Minimum Inflows and storage reserve policy:** The review of minimum inflows into dams and the need to adjust storage reserves for high-priority requirements under a more variable climate. The methodology uses historical and palaeoclimatic data, stochastic modelling, and climate projections (NARClIM 2.0) to assess risk. The current reserve provides a one-in-200-year failure rate, but future climate scenarios may require larger reserves, potentially impacting general security users.
 - **Water Sharing Plan remakes and consultation:** The team is preparing for the remake of water sharing plans, with targeted consultation planned before public exhibition. The focus is on maximising environmental outcomes with current planned and held environmental water and ensuring compliance with the Basin Plan. The timeline for public exhibition is mid-2027.
 - **Omnibus amendment:** Recent omnibus amendments standardised floodplain harvesting triggers across Northern Basin plans and introduced clauses to allow for future connectivity-related changes. The amendment aims to align with legislative requirements and operational realities, and stakeholder input was invited regarding the implementation.
 - **Economic impact analysis:** An economic analysis of the proposed changes was presented, showing the farm gate and regional economic impacts of water recovery and flow rules. The analysis uses a multiplier effect to estimate broader regional impacts, and Peter offered to connect interested parties with the department's economists for further discussion (action).
- **Northern Basin temporary water restrictions:** An update on Section 324 temporary water restrictions in the Northern Basin, focusing on the rationale for storage thresholds, recent fish deaths, water quality management, and the interplay with connectivity and floodplain harvesting rules was provided.

- **Section 324 restrictions and storage thresholds:** Section 324 of the *Water Management Act* allows the Minister to impose temporary water restrictions in the public interest, particularly during water shortages or to protect environmental values. The 250 GL active storage threshold in the upper Menindee Lakes is based on providing a 12-month supply for critical needs, with the potential to reduce to 195 GL once infrastructure repairs are completed.
- **Fish deaths and Water Quality Management:** Following mass fish deaths in 2023, the department has managed water releases from Menindee to prevent persistent stratification and anoxic conditions in the Weir 32 pool, using both operational releases and temporary fishways. The need for infrastructure upgrades, such as a gated structure at Weir 32 and a permanent fishway, was highlighted, and a business case is being developed.
- **Interstate coordination and resource sharing:** Increasing minimum releases to maintain fish health may require resource contributions from Victoria and South Australia, and discussions are ongoing with the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. Recent cooperation has seen the MDBA only taking what is necessary to maintain fish health, with the potential for future changes in resource sharing arrangements.
- **Floodplain harvesting and in-valley triggers:** The meeting addressed the use of in-valley triggers to manage floodplain harvesting and the challenges of accounting for passive water capture and compliance. Further briefings with the Natural Resources Access Regulator (NRAR) are planned, and users are encouraged to maintain accurate records.
- **Metering and compliance progress in the Gwydir Valley:** The progress of non-urban and floodplain harvesting meter installations in the Gwydir Valley, discussed compliance rates, classification of works, and addressed questions from participants about exemptions, reporting, and the impact of metering on water trading.
 - **Non-Urban metering compliance:** 54% of works requiring metering in the Gwydir Valley have installed meters with telemetry, though this figure drops to 40% when considering individual works. Many works are exempt due to entitlement thresholds or other criteria. Accurate classification of works is expected to improve compliance rates.
 - **Floodplain harvesting metering:** Floodplain harvesting metering is tracked separately, with options for point-of-intake or storage metering. Of 294 authorised storages, 133 have active measurement, 62 are declared not taking water, and 45 require further action. The process for declaring works not taking water was explained, and the impact on compliance was discussed.
 - **Exemptions and work classification:** Participants discussed the process for classifying works as not taking water, which exempts them from metering requirements. This is particularly relevant for small licence holders who may wish to trade water but retain a small portion for personal use. The WaterNSW customer portal allows users to manage these classifications.
 - **Meter accuracy and maintenance:** The importance of accurate metering was emphasised, with examples showing significant errors in older mechanical meters. Issues with new meter

reliability and calibration were acknowledged, and support is available for users to upgrade or maintain their meters.

Actions:

- **Groundwater SDL risk clarification:** Provide clarification on the proportion of the Lower Gwydir groundwater source considered at risk by the MDBA, specifying whether it is a small area or the whole water source.
- **SDL management communication:** Maintain ongoing communication and consultation with stakeholders regarding SDL management and potential changes in the Lower Gwydir area.
- **Economic impact analysis sharing:** Include the economic analysis slide and related information in the presentation pack and make it available to attendees.
- **Town water usage data request:** Determine and provide the proportion of groundwater used for town supply versus high security and general licences in the Ashley-Moree area, to assist Council in understanding potential levers for water management.
- **Fishway business case submission:** Include the proposal for a permanent fishway at Weir 32 and Lake Wetherell as a priority in the Menindee Lakes Review business case submission to the New South Wales Government.
- **Floodplain harvesting compliance briefing:** Brief NRAR about passive water capture and compliance for floodplain harvesting, especially in cases where triggers have not been reached.