

Murray Lower-Darling CAG meeting notes - 10 March 2026

Held: Tuesday 10 March 2026 – 2pm to 4:45pm

At: Wentworth Memorial Hall, 66 Darling Street, Wentworth NSW 2648

Meeting focus: provide updates on a range of Water Group water infrastructure, policy and planning projects being delivered across the Murray Lower-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
- Belinda Hanly, Communications & Engagement Advisor
- Allan Raine, Director Planning Implementation
- Peter Hyde, Director Inland Planning (online)
- Andrew Lavelle, Director Infrastructure Projects (online)
- Frances Guest, Manager Floodplain Planning (online)
- David Andersen, Manager Metering Implementation

External stakeholders:

- Murray Lower-Darling CAG members, Sally Dye (Chair)
- WaterNSW
- Emma Zouch, MDBA
- Josh Kirby, MDBA

Meeting notes

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- **Connectivity Program and Menindee Lakes Water Management:** It was discussed the impact of resumption of flow rules and connectivity flows on Menindee Lakes, clarifying that while more water may reach Menindee, these flows do not enhance connectivity to the Murray, and outlined the intent to keep additional environmental water separate from shared allocations.
 - **Resumption of flow rules:** Resumption of flow rules are designed to allow extra water to reach Menindee Lakes, but this water is intended to be retained as environmental water rather than being re-regulated into the shared resource pool. This approach aims to improve environmental outcomes by ensuring that water specifically allocated for environmental purposes is not diverted for other uses.
 - **Connectivity flow impacts:** Connectivity flows focus is on improving connectivity across northern New South Wales, particularly in the Barwon and Darling systems, rather than extending benefits downstream to the Murray.
 - **Rule triggers and dry period management:** Information provided on triggers for management actions under the new rules. These measures are intended to maintain base flows and protect environmental water during dry periods.
 - **Panel recommendations and indicators:** The panel recommended using Wilcannia as a better indicator of dryness in the northern basin compared to Menindee storages. The rules and targets are based on modelled scenarios, with specific flow and duration requirements to trigger the lifting of restrictions.
- **Minimum Inflows project and Climate variability planning:** Minimum Inflows Project, detailing the use of paleo-climate data and new modelling to inform water allocation strategies under future climate scenarios was presented.
 - **Project objectives and rationale:** Minimum Inflows Project aims to review inflow assumptions and adjust storage reserves to ensure high-priority requirements can be met under increasingly variable and extreme climate scenarios. The project responds to lessons from recent droughts, such as the Tinderbox and Millennium droughts, which exposed vulnerabilities in existing water sharing plans.
 - **Use of paleo-climate and stochastic data:** The incorporation of 10,000 years of paleo-stochastic data and the NARClIM 2.0 dataset to better understand long-term climate variability and inform risk management was explained. This approach allows

for estimation of drought risk and the design of water sharing plans that are robust to a wider range of possible futures.

- **Water allocation prioritisation:** Under the *Water Management Act*, the allocation priorities in dry scenarios are, planned environmental water, town and basic landholder rights, high security, and then general security. Modelling indicates that climate-driven changes will increase variability, with wetter periods becoming wetter and dry periods lasting longer, impacting general security allocations most significantly.
- **Consultation and implementation timeline:** The timing of consultation for the Murray water sharing plan will occur as part of the broader plan remake process, potentially within the year, depending on project phasing and inter-state coordination.
- **Wetlands policy and targeted consultation process:** The ongoing development of wetlands policy, including the approach to mapping, opportunities for landholder input, and the planned targeted consultation process for both northern and southern basins was discussed.
 - **Policy development and mapping:** It was raised by participants, the accuracy regarding the wetland mapping, with examples of misidentified wetlands on private properties. Peter Hyde acknowledged these issues, noting that some mapping originated from long-term water plans and that the process would allow for corrections based on landholder feedback.
 - **Consultation model:** Due to resource constraints, the department will conduct targeted consultations at regional locations inviting stakeholders to provide input..
 - **Water sharing plan replacement and consultation: It was** discussed the process and scope of the regulated water sharing plan replacement, including targeted consultations, submission processes, and the integration of feedback from stakeholders.
 - **Consultation and submission:** The department has undertaken targeted consultations with stakeholder groups. Feedback from these sessions, including written comments, is being considered in the plan development process, with further targeted and public consultations planned before finalisation.
 - **Scoping:** The replacement plan will focus on maximising environmental outcomes, operational issues, and updating information, while excluding changes inconsistent with the Basin Plan or those reducing environmental protections. Some issues, such as trade and connectivity through Menindee, are out of scope for the current plan.

- **North-South trial and connectivity offsets:** An update on the north-south connectivity trial, including the extension of the trial, assurance processes for loss calculations, and the pursuit of offsets for protected flows was provided.
 - **Trial extension:** The north-south trial has been approved for a further three years. Assurance processes are in place to verify loss calculations and evaporation rates as water moves through the system.
 - **Offsets and policy adjustments:** Efforts continue to secure offsets for protected flows, though the current offset is limited to approximately 2 gigalitres. Policy amendments are being considered to address issues such as the resetting of triggers when minor protected flows occur.
- **Under-Use of water allocations and carryover behaviour:** Participants discussed the issue of under-use of water allocations in the Murray, focusing on carryover practices, the influence of policy changes, and the need for further investigation into user behaviour and market dynamics.
 - **Carryover:** Analysis indicates that most carryover is controlled by a small number of large water users, who use it as a risk management and business strategy. The department plans to conduct face-to-face meetings with these users to better understand their behaviour before considering policy changes (action listed below).
 - **Market and policy drivers:** Participants highlighted that cumulative rule changes, speculative trading, and the disconnection of water from land have contributed to increased carryover and under-use. The department acknowledged these concerns and agreed to document and review the impact of policy changes since 2000.
 - **Stakeholder engagement and Basin Plan Review:** Participants suggested that under-use should be considered in the Basin Plan review. The department agreed to include the issue in the New South Wales Government's submission. The department is open to working with stakeholders to assess the full range of rule changes affecting water use.
- **Menindee Lakes review and operational challenges:** MDBA presented the Menindee Lakes Review, outlining the joint government initiative to assess operational, infrastructure, and management options for the lakes, and the public consultation to inform future decisions.
 - **Review scope and objectives:** The review, initiated by New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and the Commonwealth, aims to address long-standing challenges at Menindee Lakes, including drought impacts, fish deaths, and water quality issues. The

focus is on operational elements within joint government control, such as water sharing, infrastructure, and complementary actions.

- **Consultation and information gathering:** A comprehensive information package, including technical reports and issues papers, has been released to support public consultation. Stakeholders are encouraged to provide input on what is important to them, perceived challenges, and potential options for change.
- **Integration with other reviews:** The Menindee Lakes Review is being coordinated with other ongoing processes, such as the Basin Plan review and connectivity program updates, to ensure alignment and leverage shared information. Submissions to the Menindee Lakes Review can also inform related processes.
- **Infrastructure and operational proposals:** Specific proposals, such as reactivating the Penellco Channel to access additional water and reduce evaporation losses, were discussed. These options will be considered in the review, subject to cost-benefit analysis and technical feasibility.
- **Metering compliance and works classification:** S An update on metering compliance in the Murray and Lower Darling, explaining exemptions, classification processes, and support programmes for water users to achieve compliance was provided.
 - **Compliance status and deadlines:** Current compliance rates for metering are around 55% in the Murray and Lower Darling, with deadlines for smaller water users extending to 2027 and beyond. Exemptions apply based on work size, type, and classification.
 - **Works classification and exemptions:** Works can be classified as constructed, not taking water, or for basic landholder rights only, which exempts them from metering requirements. The classification process is managed through the WaterNSW customer portal, and users are encouraged to update their records to reflect current usage.
 - **Support and incentive programmes:** Subsidies and cash-back programs are available to assist users with telemetry device installation and compliance. Resources such as job aids and installer courses are provided to facilitate the transition to compliant metering.
- **SDLAM Acceleration program and Infrastructure projects:** Progress on the SDLAM Acceleration Programme, detailing construction milestones, regional investment, and

stakeholder engagement for projects such as the Mid-Murray Anabranches and Millewa Forest was presented.

- **Project progress:** The program is on track for completion by the end of 2026, with 93% of construction packages awarded and significant progress on key infrastructure such as bridges, regulators, and access tracks. Regional investment totals approximately \$194 million, supporting 300 construction jobs.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Extensive engagement with landholders, local councils, and other stakeholders is ongoing, including regular updates, meetings, and media communications. The program aims to deliver both environmental and social benefits, including improved connectivity and support for First Nations values.
- **Project scope and requirements:** Questions were addressed regarding the completion of bridges and access approaches by 2026, with clarification that the project delivers approaches to crossings as required by landholders, but not extensive access roads across private properties.

Actions:

- **Consultation on minimum inflows for the Murray:** Communicate the specific timing and process for consultation on minimum inflows for the Murray within the Water Sharing Plan (WSP) timeframe to stakeholders.
- **North-South trial and connectivity assurance:** Provide further information and updates to stakeholders regarding the assurance and review of loss calculations for Queensland accounts and the status of the north-south connectivity trial.
- **Wetland mapping corrections:** Provide information to landholders on when consultations will commence on corrections to inaccurate wetland mapping.
- **Investigation of carryover and underuse in water allocations:** Conduct meetings with both large and small water users, including stakeholder groups, to understand behavioural changes and drivers of carryover and underuse in water allocations, and analyse findings to inform potential policy recommendations.
- **Basin Plan Review:** Department agreed to include underuse in the New South Wales government submission to the Basin Plan Review.
- **Documentation of Policy and Rule Changes Impacting Water Use:** Work with stakeholders to document and assess the cumulative impact of policy and rule changes since 2000 on

local economies and water use and consider including this analysis in the NSW Government's submission to the Basin Plan review.

- **Penellco Channel Feasibility and communication:** Provide stakeholders with maps and an explanation of the Penellco channel, including its capabilities, pros and cons, and whether NSW has considered its use for accessing dead storage and supporting food production.