

Peel CAG meeting notes – March 2026

Held: Monday 16 March 2026 – 12noon to 3:30pm

At: WaterNSW Tamworth Office

Meeting focus: provide updates on a range of Water Group water infrastructure, policy and planning projects being delivered across the Peel 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
- Amber McSwiney, Senior Communications and Engagement Advisor
- Peter Hyde, Director Inland Water Planning, Water Group
- Shahadat Chowdhury, Manager Water Allocations
- Wayne Andrews, Senior Project Officer Engagement

External stakeholders:

- Peel CAG members, John Richards (Chair)
- WaterNSW

Meeting notes

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- **Northern Basin Connectivity program update:** update on the Northern Basin Connectivity Program was provided, detailing its history, rule changes, impacts on water users, and the ongoing consultation and modelling process.
 - **Program background:** The Northern Basin Connectivity Program originated in the mid-1990s following significant algal blooms, aiming to increase transparency in system operations and improve environmental and human water outcomes.
 - **Recommended rule changes:** The panel appointed in 2023 recommended: changes to end-of-system flows during non-dry times, resumption of flow rules during dry periods, and a connectivity environmental water allowance (EWA). 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.

Consultation and next steps: Targeted consultation is ongoing, with further modelling planned and potential changes to follow. All relevant materials, including economic analyses and environmental benefit quantifications, are available on the department's website, and future meetings and webinars are planned to keep stakeholders informed.

- **Minimum inflows:** The review of minimum inflows and storage reserves was discussed, focusing on ensuring high-priority water requirements under increasingly variable climate conditions, and outlined the use of historical, paleo, and climate model data to inform future water sharing plans.
 - **Methodology:** The project aims to review inflow sequences and adjust storage reserves to secure town water supply, basic landholder rights, and high-security needs. The methodology incorporates historical drought records, paleo-climatic data (such as tree rings and sediment cores), and climate model projections to assess risk and inform reserve settings.
 - **Findings and risk assessment:** Analysis revealed that recent droughts produced lower inflows than previously recorded, highlighting the need for improved risk management. Modelling suggests that, under climate change scenarios, current reserves may be insufficient, potentially requiring an increase from 40 to 80 gigalitres to maintain acceptable security levels.
 - **Adaptive management and implementation:** Potential use of adaptive management strategies, such as dynamically adjusting reserves based on dam storage levels and inflows and the importance of embedding these approaches in water sharing plans. The methodology and any future trigger resets will be made public, with further consultation planned once modelling for the Peel is complete.
 - **Stakeholder engagement and review:** The Office of the Chief Scientist and Engineer reviewed the methodology, resulting in 13 recommendations, 12 of which have been accepted. Webinars and targeted consultations are ongoing, and the department is committed to transparency and stakeholder involvement in finalising the analysis and implementing changes.
- **Water infrastructure and augmentation options:** Participants debated the merits and drawbacks of various water infrastructure projects such as dam augmentation, new dams, and alternative solutions for Tamworth, considering economic, environmental, and practical factors.
 - **Dam augmentation and new dams:** The group discussed past and proposed dam projects, including the Dungowan Dam and Chaffey Dam augmentation, noting the high costs, limited additional water security, and the diminishing returns due to catchment size and rainfall variability. The government ultimately decided against proceeding with new large-scale dams in the region.
 - **Alternative water security solutions:** Alternative options such as advanced wastewater treatment plants and pipelines from existing storages were considered. While these may not directly increase water security, they can support industrial use without impacting existing

allocations. The Namoi pipeline was noted to have potential downstream impacts, which require careful assessment.

- **Economic and environmental considerations:** Economic analyses indicated that some dam projects, such as the Mole River and Wyangala extensions, were not cost-effective due to high construction and environmental offset costs. The group acknowledged that all viable dam sites in the region have largely been utilised, and future solutions must balance cost, environmental impact, and water security.
- **Water sharing plan reviews and stakeholder consultation:** The ongoing review and extension of regulated and unregulated water sharing plans was outlined.
 - **Plan extension and remake process:** The 6 inland regulated water sharing plans are being extended to 2028, with targeted consultation underway involving water users, local governments, and environmental departments. The Peel Water Sharing Plan has incorporated the Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) compliance method as required by the Basin Plan.
 - **Integration with Basin Plan and MDBA review:** The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) is conducting a review, which may influence future plan changes
 - **Consultation methods:** The department is conducting phased, targeted consultations and may convene broader forums before public consultation. Feedback from previous processes, such as river management committees, was acknowledged as a valuable contribution.
- **Unregulated Water Sharing Plan and Cease-to-Pump rule:** The meeting addressed the status of the unregulated water sharing plan for the Peel and Namoi, focusing on the cease-to-pump rule, stakeholder submissions, and the use of remote sensing and metering to inform future decisions.
 - **Cease-to-Pump rule and stakeholder input:** The cease-to-pump rule, initially set at half a metre has been subject to significant feedback from water users and councils. Submissions from the Peel and Cockburn Valley water users have been forwarded to the Ministers for Water and Environment for consideration.
- **Metering compliance and implementation update:** A detailed update on metering compliance in the Peel Valley was presented, explaining user categories, compliance rates, exemptions, and the process for classifying works, with discussion on technical and administrative aspects.
 - **User categories and compliance requirements:** Users are divided into three categories based on entitlement size: over 100 megalitres (requiring a dually qualified person for installation), under 15 megalitres (exempt), and 15–100 megalitres (with phased requirements). Over half of individual works are exempt due to small size or low usage.
 - **Works classification and customer portal:** The classification of works determines metering requirements, with the WaterNSW portal enabling users to declare which works are active or exempt. Accurate classification can improve compliance statistics and reduce unnecessary metering obligations.
 - **Meter types and accuracy:** A significant proportion of meters are old mechanical types, which are less accurate and require upgrading. Modern pattern-approved meters provide

- greater accuracy, and technical drawings are available to assist users with self-installation for smaller entitlements.
- **Floodplain harvesting and special cases:** Floodplain harvesting metering is managed separately due to its complexity, requiring farm water balances and measurement devices in on-farm storage. The process involves accounting for surface water, groundwater, and rainfall runoff, with specific measurement periods.
 - **Telemetry Uplift program:** A government-supported telemetry uplift program is available, offering installation by contractors or cashback for eligible self-installations. Details are provided via handouts and web links, and users are encouraged to participate to enhance compliance and reporting.

Actions:

- **Distribution of meeting materials:** Send the link to the water website, where the agenda, actions, and presentations will be uploaded, to John and other participants once available.
- **Modelling results for Peel Valley:** Complete the modelling outputs for the Peel Valley and arrange a follow-up meeting or webinar to present and discuss the results with stakeholders.