

Water Engagement Roundtable

What We Heard

Date: 10 December 2021, 10:30am – 12:30pm

Location: Online (via MS Teams)

Chair: Jim Bentley, CEO NSW Water Sector

Overview

The purpose of this meeting was to listen to and learn with our stakeholders. We intend to hold future roundtables to continue the conversation.

The meeting served to initiate a broader conversation and shared understanding of how we can better:

- understand stakeholder needs and ensure their interests are considered.
- include diverse perspectives and increased transparency in the design and delivery of our work.
- collaborate and engage across communities, industries and organisations to achieve shared long-term outcomes
- identify opportunities to improve coordination and alignment of water sector engagement to deliver services more effectively for NSW communities and the environment.

The feedback and learnings from this session will inform:

- how we continue to implement [Priority 1 of the NSW Water Strategy¹](#)
- the development of the Department of Planning and Environment Engagement Framework and Charter in 2022
- how we continue to improve communication and collaboration with communities, industry and organisations.

The meeting was chaired by NSW Water Sector CEO Jim Bentley.

Stakeholders were invited to represent the views of a diverse range of peak bodies and organisations, including Aboriginal, industry, environment, and government bodies.

Attendees

Peak Stakeholders	Government Stakeholders
Australian Floodplain Association	Commonwealth Environmental Water Office
Business NSW	Murray Darling Basin Authority

¹ Priority 1: Build community confidence and capacity through engagement, transparency and accountability

Peak Stakeholders	Government Stakeholders
Inland Rivers Network	Regional NSW
Local Government NSW	Natural Resources Access Regulator
MDBA Basin Community Committee	DPIE – Office of Local Government
Murray Regional Strategy Group	DPIE – Environment, Energy and Science
Nature Conservation Council	Water NSW
NSW Aboriginal Land Council	Apologies
NSW Farmers	Environmental Defenders Office
NSW Irrigators Council	Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations
NSW Minerals Council	Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations
NTS Corp	Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists
Recreational Fishing NSW Advisory Council	
Water Directorate	

Feedback

The following table on the following pages summarise the feedback, learnings and actions heard in this meeting.

Theme	Comment/Action
Engagement alignment and coordination	Stakeholders expressed: - the need for an over-arching consultation and engagement strategy involving all water engagement teams and stakeholders - frustration at the high volume and timing of meetings, putting pressure on limited resources and constraining the ability of stakeholders to participate meaningfully - the need to better align government engagement activities - pressure to roll-out departmental programs and spend grant funding in set government timeframes, leading to outsourcing to consultants and organisations missing out on capacity building Stakeholders acknowledged: - shortcomings in previous engagement delivery and strategy - improvements to recent engagement and support activities, particularly with local water utilities and councils - improved collaboration between government departments and stakeholders is critical to achieving collective outcomes Stakeholders support: - regular opportunities for stakeholders to raise concerns and issues as they arise (across multiple projects/programs), not dependent on project timelines - an improved strategic and coordinated approach to engagement - increased transparency and access to information - opportunities to review programs/projects with the department to build community capacity and minimise outsourcing
Evidence-based and transparent decision making	Stakeholders stressed: - the need to find a way to communicate or provide greater transparency of business cases without compromising commercial details - the need for more recognition of ecosystem services in planning and policy Stakeholders value: - thorough and open communication about how, when and why decisions are made - access to data and information Stakeholders support: - increased community engagement to understand, utilise and share local knowledge in planning, policy and delivery decisions increased oversight and communication around project timelines

Theme	Comment/Action
Consultation timing	Stakeholders expressed: - fatigue at the number of individual water project engagements happening concurrently or overlapping - frustration that submission/consultation periods can be too short to allow sufficient time to engage and consult with members/ constituent bodies, particularly for complex policies and projects - a need for improved access to information and longer timeframes to digest, understand and give feedback - more consideration needed of industry and community pressure points and for calendar events, e.g., Christmas, end of year, harvest - frustration that long-term projects can have years between consultations with little progress or communications in between Stakeholders value: - regional considerations, e.g., harvest times, school holidays, major events - open and two-way communications channels (stakeholder to government) to directly report issues and address poor engagement coordination - more visibility of project timelines and advance notice of when projects are coming up for consultation - more time to prepare for consultation meetings - more time to consider and understand new policies/projects and to make submissions
Understanding the big picture	Stakeholders raised: - the need for more whole of basin “systems thinking” and a joined-up approach to provide clarity to interactions of projects/ programs/ policies - the need for more transparency on project/decision processes and timelines and how and why a project/decision has been made - the importance of government articulating the potential systemic and cumulative impacts of water policy decisions over time and triggers to review continued effectiveness, for example in relation to water availability and allocations Stakeholders support: the implementation of the overarching NSW Water Strategy and the place-based Regional Water Strategies

Theme	Comment/Action
Meaningful and genuine engagement	Stakeholders stressed: - engagement must be based on mutual trust and carried out in good faith - a desire to build ongoing relationships with the department - a need for place-based or tailored engagement, rather than a one size fits all approach - the need to identify the right stakeholders to access local knowledge and understanding - the need to identify a broader range of stakeholders, including “non-affiliated community leaders” Stakeholders are concerned: - there is a level of mistrust of the department within communities because of previous shortcomings, including not delivering on commitments. - their voices are not always heard or acted on appropriately due to short engagement/project timeframes Stakeholders value: - meaningful and ongoing conversations for improved mutual understanding - open and varied channels of communication and information sharing recognising that mixed approaches reach more people - regular open forums to engage with a broad spectrum of water stakeholders - constructive small format targeted engagement - bold and customer-centric approaches to engagement, e.g., Connectivity Reference Group - holistic, transparent, and place-based engagement and solutions - improved water knowledge to empower participation

Theme	Comment/Action
Indigenous/ First Nations engagement	Stakeholders raised: - the need for strong Indigenous voices, and for those voices to be listened to with reduced need to tell their story repeatedly - engagement fatigue and resource strain due to the volume and complexity of water engagements and projects - the desire to have higher level meetings covering multiple projects/programs rather than individual project meetings to alleviate pressure on resources - the need for more fit-for-purpose infrastructure to support remote communities Stakeholders value: - opportunities to participate in the planning and design of engagement activities - a partnership approach to build ongoing relationships - identification of Indigenous employment opportunities, e.g., DQP (Duly Qualified Person) metering certification Stakeholders support: - regular open forums to engage across multiple water projects, rather than multiple individual engagements/project-based engagement - the review, collation and use of previous engagement feedback to keep the relationship/conversation moving forward - ongoing cross-sector collaboration and initiatives such as the Basin Community Committee and River Reflections - the appointment of an Aboriginal Water Director
Face-to-face engagement	Stakeholders value: the opportunity to have a choice in how they can engage moving forward, e.g., online, face-to-face, phone or hybrid mixed models

Theme	Comment/Action
River systems, management and allocations	Stakeholders expressed: • concern over the capacity of river systems to sustainably operate under a free-market arrangement • concern over rapid industry growth in regional communities placing resource strains on councils and other organisations to meaningfully engage on water issues • a desire for more clarity around the 'black box' of policy drivers, i.e., river operations, reform, regulatory changes, and the cumulative effect of those changes over time • appreciation for the department's increased engagement, including increased access to more useful information on how allocations are made • frustration that water quality is equally as challenging as water quantity but may not attract the same attention or resources • the need to fund fish and environmental infrastructure on an ongoing basis without relying solely on grant funding and/or charging water users Stakeholders stressed: • their voices have not always felt heard regarding river management issues • the need for a ground-up 'whole of basin' approach to river management issues • environmental needs are not always as equally represented as commercial needs • the reliance on held environmental water overshadows the role of natural flows for river and ecological health • increased community engagement and capital expenditure is critical to finding solutions to river management issues Stakeholders support: • increased overview of all reform and policy decisions and how they interplay • increased clarity of water allocations and environmental water management

Actions from meeting

Issue raised	Action taken/to be taken
An issue was raised regarding a 'black box' of the cumulative impact of changes in policy drivers and river operations in response to policy reforms over 15-20 years, coupled with changes in metrics and risk appetite with drought, and how that impacts allocations and available water. It was noted that the National Water Initiative requires this cumulative regulatory impact to be considered when trading off different options.	DPE Water agreed to continue this discussion in 2022.
An issue was raised regarding the need for the department to be able to publicly communicate and share business case information and inputs without risking or compromising commercial in confidence information.	CEO NSW Water Sector acknowledged the issue and committed the department will come back to this stakeholder group with recommendations to address the issue.

Next steps

- Publish the What We Heard report on our website in line with our commitment to transparency, and email direct to attendees
- Develop and implement actions for better engagement and partnerships based on what we heard at this meeting
- Release, seek feedback and implement the department's Engagement Framework and Charter (early 2022)
- Continue Water Engagement Roundtables, and targeted regional Stakeholder Conversations in 2022. Dates TBA.

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