North Coast Stakeholder Engagement Meeting

What We Heard

Date: 17 September 2021, 11am–12.30pm

Location: Online (via Microsoft Teams)

Chair: Jim Bentley, CEO NSW Water Sector

Overview

The purpose of this meeting was to initiate a broader conversation and shared understanding of how we can:

- identify and understand the most effective and preferred methods and channels of engagement and communication of water policy, planning and delivery.
- identify opportunities to better partner with the community and organisations to achieve shared outcomes.

The feedback and learnings from this session will inform:

- how we continue to improve collaboration and engagement with North Coast communities
- the development of a place-based strategic engagement approach.

This meeting was chaired by Jim Bentley, CEO NSW Water Sector, following a commitment made in April 2021.

Stakeholders were invited from a diverse range of North Coast community, industry and government groups.

The following stakeholders and organisations participated in the meeting:

Attendees

1. Jim Bentley, CEO NSW Water Sector (Chair)
2. Beth Trevan, Coordinator, Our Future Northern Rivers
3. Richard Trevan, Spokesperson, Our Future Northern Rivers
4. Chris Magner, Chair, Richmond Wilson Combined/Tidal Water Users Group and NSW Irrigators Council
5. Craig Salmon, Manager Water and Wastewater, Bellingen Shire Council
6. Jim Morrison, Committee member, Nature Conservation Council
7. Keith Thompson, Compliance Coordinator, O'Driscolls
8. Lou Forsythe, Secretary, Armidale Ratepayers Association
9. Mark Bulley, North Coast and Tablelands Services Manager, NSW Farmers
10. Mathew Holmes, Manager Operations, Costa Group
11. Neville Beaumont, Producer and Horticulturist, Dorrigo
12. Rodger Pryce, East Dorrigo/Coffs Harbour Community Representative

13. Sally Whitelaw, Team Leader Biodiversity, Coastal and Flooding, Coffs Harbour City Council
14. Mark Simons, Director RWS Southern & Coastal (Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE)
15. Anna Bailey, Director Coastal and Groundwater Planning (DPIE)
16. Andy Goulstone, Manager Water Policy and Legislation (DPIE)
17. Natasha Hudson, Director Office of Deputy Secretary (DPIE)
18. Linda Barach, Manager Water Relationships (DPIE)

Apologies

- Angus Sharpe, Group Leader (Acting) Infrastructure Construction and Maintenance, Coffs Harbour City Council
- Bruce Schwartz, Agriculture Chair, Dorrigo Chamber of Commerce
- Elizabeth O'Hara, Armidale Ratepayers Association/Wando
- Kellon Beard, Regional Manager, Mid North Coast, Business NSW
- Peter Smith, Councillor, NSW Aboriginal Lands Council
- Satpal Gill, Chairman, OzGroup
- Tricia Beatty, CEO, Professional Fishermen's Association
- Sam Towndrow, Coastal Works, Water and Sewer Section Leader

Feedback

The following table summarises the feedback received during the session.

Theme	Comment/Action
Connecting with the community	Stakeholders expressed: • concern that the department was not connecting with the public on the issues that mattered to them • frustration around the difficulties in finding out what was happening/progress with a particular project or program of work • acknowledgment that public engagement can be challenging for all government agencies. Stakeholders shared: • an example of a local (community led) public engagement that had a huge response rate related to a local issue. Stakeholders value: • transparency in the engagement process.

Theme	Comment/Action
Complexity of water management in NSW	Stakeholders raised: • A lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities of each department or organisation in the water sector. An example was given that it can be difficult for Council to understand which department to call about water, let alone how difficult it must be for a member of the public. • The nature of departmental silos often prevents a "systems thinking" approach to water management – for example, managing urban flooding / urban water security / water quality as part of a whole rather than as three separate issues • Uncertainty around the roles and who to contact when they need a quick answer. An example was given of a water user just wanting to know if they can pump water. • Issues around being overwhelmed by the complexity and rules of water management in NSW. Stakeholders value: • easy to digest information, that is customer service centric • central online location to find correct contacts, whether it be a portal or an enquiries line • better explanations of the roles and responsibilities of each section of water.
Uniqueness of coastal areas	Stakeholders stressed: • the need to recognise local variability • being mindful of language and "motherhood statements" in strategies; recycled water in the NSW State Water Strategy was cited as an example. Stakeholders support: • a regular forum for stakeholders to raise concerns and issues as they arise • an ongoing two-way information exchange between stakeholders and the department to minimise surprises • a forum that is outcome focused and 'not just a talkfest' • a flexible approach to engagement so that everybody with an interest has an opportunity to be heard • smaller sub-group engagement, such as a Coffs Harbour group, that has unique local issues.

Theme	Comment/Action
Better co-ordination/ access to information	Stakeholders stressed: • the value of creating a centralised water contact for information and enquiries.
Understanding how local councils work	Stakeholders expressed: • the importance of engagement with a wide range of council staff. Like the department, local councils are large organisations. An example was given where only the urban water branch of council was consulted; this meant that biodiversity / water quality concerns were not adequately considered • the department should engage with elected representatives (councillors) and administration (council staff) • the need for council staff to be supported to understand and implement policy correctly. **Action:** Explore how the department can better support Coffs Harbour City Council. **Action:** The department to follow up with Sally Whitelaw re impact of recycled water use on intermittently open and closed lakes or lagoons. ***Status:*** Department staff have followed up on these actions with relevant council staff.
Submission overload	Stakeholders expressed: submission fatigue. frustration that they want to be a part of the process and have a voice but can be overwhelmed by the number of submissions and the length of the process. Stakeholders value: A simple, straightforward process for submissions, including online.
Consultation timing	Stakeholders expressed: • frustration that calls for submissions frequently occur at the end of the year and the submission period includes the Christmas/end of year holidays. Stakeholders value: • consideration of school holidays and other major calendar events eg. harvest • notice of when a project might be coming • more time to consider projects or new policies, and to make submissions.

Theme	Comment/Action
Understanding the big picture	Stakeholders expressed: • a desire to understand the context of how and why a project/decision has been developed and where this decision fits into the timeline of the process. • the need to see the process for major and long-term projects.
Evidence-based and transparent decision making	Stakeholders value: • thorough and open communication around how decisions are made • access to data and information, including costs.
Trust in the process – better feedback mechanisms to keep the community informed	Stakeholders stressed: • the importance of providing a feedback loop to all meetings, engagements, and projects. Often stakeholders are asked for feedback, but they are not updated on outcomes. • the need to capture 'what we heard' notes from meetings and to feedback actions in a timely manner • the need to have an ongoing two-way conversation line between the department and the community.
Emergency services water during fires	A stakeholder raised the question: • Has there been any discussions or decisions made around whether landholders, who had significant water taken by emergency services to fight the 2019-2020 fires, will have their supplies replenished? **Action:** Follow up with Mark Bulley (NSW Farmers) to further understand the issue of dams replenishment following emergency use for bush fires. ***Status:*** Department staff have followed up on this issue and provided advice to Mark Bulley.

Next steps

- Publish the "What we Heard" from North Coast stakeholders on our website, and email direct to attendees.
- Develop actions for a region-centric/place-focused engagement model for stakeholder feedback.
- Continue engagement discussions with stakeholders in other coastal regions.

Stay informed

Water is one of our most valuable natural assets. We have a responsibility to the people of NSW to ensure we manage water equitably and transparently now and into the future.

We meet regularly with stakeholders on key projects and provide opportunities for input on policies, plans, and other relevant documents, as described in our Community Engagement Policy.

An overview of upcoming meetings, exhibitions, and other public engagement activities, including registration links, can be found here - Upcoming consultation and engagement events.

We also hold a monthly Water Engagement Roundup webinar that provides updates on all current and upcoming consultation and engagement on important water policy and programs, including opportunities for Q&A.

To register or learn more please visit the Water Engagement Roundup website.

Sign up to our Water News newsletter to keep up to date with information on upcoming engagements and programs.

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