Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2026

Background, consultation and changes

May 2026

NSW GOVERNMENT

Acknowledgement of Country

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land and pays respect to Elders past, present and future.

We recognise Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to place and their rich contribution to society.

Artist and designer Nikita Ridgeway from Aboriginal design agency – Boss Lady Creative Designs, created the People and Community symbol.

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Published by NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

dcceew.nsw.gov.au

First published: May 2026

Department or Agency reference number: PUB25/184

Acknowledgements

Cover image: courtesy of Amy Halliday, Numeralla River

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Glossary and abbreviations

Term	Definition
AWD	Available water determination
BLR	Basic landholder right
CtP	Commence to pump
Barwon Darling 2012 plan	Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2012
Barwon Darling 2026 plan	Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2026
DCCEEW	Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water
IDEC	Individual daily extraction component The IDEC is part of the extraction component of an access licence, specifying the daily volume of water that may be taken under the licence by reference to daily flow shares.
LTAAEL	Long-term average annual extraction limit. The long-term average annual volume of water in an extraction management unit or water sharing plan area available to be lawfully extracted or otherwise taken under access licences and basic landholder rights.
MER	Monitoring, evaluation and reporting
NRC	Natural Resources Commission (NSW)
NSW	New South Wales
PEW	Planned environmental water
Share component	An entitlement to a given number of shares of the available water in a specified water source. The share component on an access licence certificate is expressed as a unit share. The share component of a specific purpose access licence (for example, local water utility, major water utility and domestic and stock) is expressed in megalitres/year.

Term	Definition
TDEL	Total daily extraction limit
Third or higher order stream	'Stream order' is used to describe the hierarchy of streams from the top to the bottom of a catchment. To determine stream order, apply the Strahler system to streams shown in the hydro line spatial data: https://www.water.dcceew.nsw.gov.au/our-work/licensing-and-approvals/controlled-activity-approvals/development-activities-waterfront-0
TWS	Town water supply
WM Act	*Water Management Act 2000*
Plan	Water sharing plan. A generalised term used for any water sharing plan and not specific to a particular plan.

Contents

1 Introduction

Water sharing plans (plans) were developed for rivers and groundwater systems across New South Wales (NSW) following the introduction of the *Water Management Act 2000* (WM Act). These plans protect the health of our rivers and groundwater while providing water users perpetual access licences, sustainable resource management, equitable water sharing arrangements, and increased opportunities to trade water.

NSW water sharing plans are in place for 10 years from their commencement. The NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (the department) may recommend changes to plans during this period to maintain legislative compliance and support their operation. Near the end of a plan's 10-year term, the Natural Resources Commission formally reviews it to identify any changes that are necessary to deliver better outcomes for all water users, including the environment.

Water in the Barwon-Darling river has previously been managed through the Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2012 (Barwon Darling 2012 plan).

This plan expired in June 2025 and was replaced by the Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2026 (Barwon Darling 2026 plan).

This document gives high-level background information on the planning process as well as details of changes to management arrangements arising in the new plan, which we will refer to as the Barwon Darling 2026 plan.

The Barwon Darling 2026 plan covers 1 water source, the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source, defined as:

- the water source identified on the plan map, and
- all water between the beds and banks of the sections of water courses specified in Schedule 1 of the Barwon Darling 2026 plan within the Border Rivers, Central West, Gwydir, Namoi and Western water management areas.

The water source includes all surface water and all water taken under a floodplain harvesting (unregulated river) access licence with a share component that specifies the water source.

You can find links to the plan, maps and rule summary sheet on the Barwon Darling 2026 plan page on the department's website.

The resources in 'Appendix A – References and supporting documents' detail the plan area, its water resources and resource management.

2 Purpose of water sharing plans

Expansion of water extraction across NSW since the beginning of the 20th century has seen increasing competition between water users (towns, farmers, and industries) for access to water. This has placed pressure on the health and biological diversity of our rivers and aquifers.

In December 2000, the Parliament of NSW passed the WM Act, which has the overall objective to

> ‘provide for the sustainable and integrated management of the water sources of the State for the benefit of both present and future generations’

Water sharing plans play a major role in achieving this objective by providing a legal basis for sharing water between the environment and consumptive water users.

Water sharing plans are the primary means of carrying out the WM Act. They protect the basic rights of landholders to extract water and seek to balance the sustainable use of water for both economic and environmental outcomes.

3 Legislation, policy and planning framework

3.1 Water Management Act 2000

The *Water Management Act 2000* (WM Act) is the guiding legislation for water management in NSW. The WM Act allows for the sustainable and integrated management of water sources. It considers ecologically sustainable development, the protection and enhancement of the environment, and social and economic benefits.

The WM Act sets a maximum initial lifespan of 10 years for water sharing plans, at which point they need to be reviewed and replaced or extended. When deciding whether to extend or replace a water sharing plan, the responsible minister must consider:

- the most recent audit of the water sharing plan conducted under section 44 of the WM Act
- a report from the NSW Natural Resources Commission (NRC) that reviews (within the previous 5years) if the water sharing provisions have significantly helped to achieve, or have failed to achieve, environmental, social and economic outcomes, and if those provisions should change.

Under the WM Act, a water sharing plan may be extended for up to 2 years past the expiry date to allow the department to prepare a replacement plan.

You can review the NSW *Water Management Act 2000* on the NSW Legislation website.

3.2 Water sharing plans

A water sharing plan sets out locally appropriate rules and management arrangements for specific water sources that align with the principles of the WM Act.

Key elements of water sharing plans include:

- providing water for the environment by protecting a proportion of the water available for fundamental ecosystem health
- protecting the water required to meet basic landholder rights

- setting annual limits on water extractions that ensures security for water users and the environment
- giving water users a clear picture of when and how water will be available for extraction
- giving licence holders flexibility in the way they can manage their water accounts
- specifying the rules for water trading/dealings
- setting the mandatory conditions that apply to licence holders.

You can review the Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2026 on the water sharing plan pages of the department's website.

3.3 NSW and Commonwealth water policy

We continually review and improve water-related policy and the decision-making processes used to implement the legislative framework, to ensure the effective delivery of our water resource management objectives. We develop plans in line with the principles of the WM Act and the National Water Initiative.

You can find more information on the National Water Initiative on the Australian Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water website.

The department is also developing a position to provide for better protection for significant wetlands in unregulated water sources. Amendments to protect significant wetlands in the Barwon Darling 2026 Plan will be considered following further stakeholder consultation.

4 Water sharing plan review and replacement process

Under the WM Act, water sharing plans have a 10-year duration.

During the life of the plan, it will undergo an independent review at least twice, as follows:

- the **implementation of the plan** will be audited in the first 5 years of the plan under section 44 of the WM Act
- the **performance of the plan** will be reviewed in the last 5 years of the plan under section 43A of the WM Act.

The NRC is the independent body that audits and reviews water sharing plans. section 44 audits aim to identify where improvements are necessary to apply the plan rules. The section 43A review is to determine if the plan is achieving the intended environmental, social and economic outcomes.

The NRC reports the findings of the audits and reviews to the NSW Minister responsible for water, who decides whether to extend a plan for another 10 years or to replace it. If the NRC recommends replacing it, the department considers the commission's recommendations when developing the replacement plan.

More information and links to the reviews of the Barwon Darling 2012 plan are in 'Appendix A – References and supporting documents'.

The then Minister for Water, Property and Housing adopted the NRC's recommendation to replace the Barwon Darling 2012 plan. To allow time to review and replace the plan, it was extended by 2 years.

You can find more information on the water sharing plan review and replacement process in the Replacement Water Sharing Plan Guide (PDF 1.28 MB).

5 The Barwon Darling 2026 plan

5.1 Overview

The Barwon-Darling River comprises the main river channel of the Barwon-Darling river system located in western NSW. It begins at the junction of the Weir River and Macintyre River upstream from Mungindi and extends to the upper limits of Menindee Lakes downstream from Wilcannia.

The Barwon-Darling is an unregulated river system which incorporates the Darling River, the second longest river in Australia. The river system runs southwest through low relief country with starting elevations of about 200 metres at the confluence of the Macintyre and Weir rivers and running approximately 1600 kilometres to the Menindee Lakes at elevations of less than 100 metres.

Downstream of Mungindi, the Barwon River is joined by several major tributaries – the Gwydir, Namoi, Castlereagh, Macquarie and Bogan rivers from the south, and the Culgoa River from the north.

Downstream of the Culgoa junction, the river becomes the Darling River. The Warrego and Paroo rivers join the Darling River downstream of Bourke, but these flow into the river only during major flooding.

Downstream of Wilcannia the Darling River flows into the Menindee Lakes, a series of 7 large, shallow lakes that have been modified for water storage.

Water users along the Barwon-Darling rely on the river for town water supply, livestock grazing and irrigated agriculture including cotton, citrus, grapes, and vegetables. The cotton and citrus industries in the catchment are significant water users. Grazing is the main land use in the Barwon-Darling Valley (78%), followed by dryland cropping (12%). Irrigated cropping makes up 3 percent of the land area and is centred mostly between Mungindi and Bourke.

The Barwon-Darling river is located within the traditional lands of, and is significant to, the Barkandji/Maljangapa, Gomeroi/Kamilaroi/Gamilaroi/Gamilaraay, Murrawarri, Ngemba, and Ngiyampaa Nations and traditional owners.

The river provides town water supply to regional centres; Walgett, Brewarrina, North Bourke, Bourke, Louth and Wilcannia.

While the Barwon-Darling River is unregulated, regulated rivers in NSW contribute 70% of the river's flow. NSW and Queensland headwater storages, which feed into the Barwon-Darling, were

constructed with a capacity of 5200 GL. Numerous weirs have also been constructed along the length of the river system to provide temporary storage pools for irrigation and town water supplies.

The Barwon Darling 2026 plan consists of 1 water source with 14 management zones (shown in Figure 1

Figure 1 Plan area for the Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2026

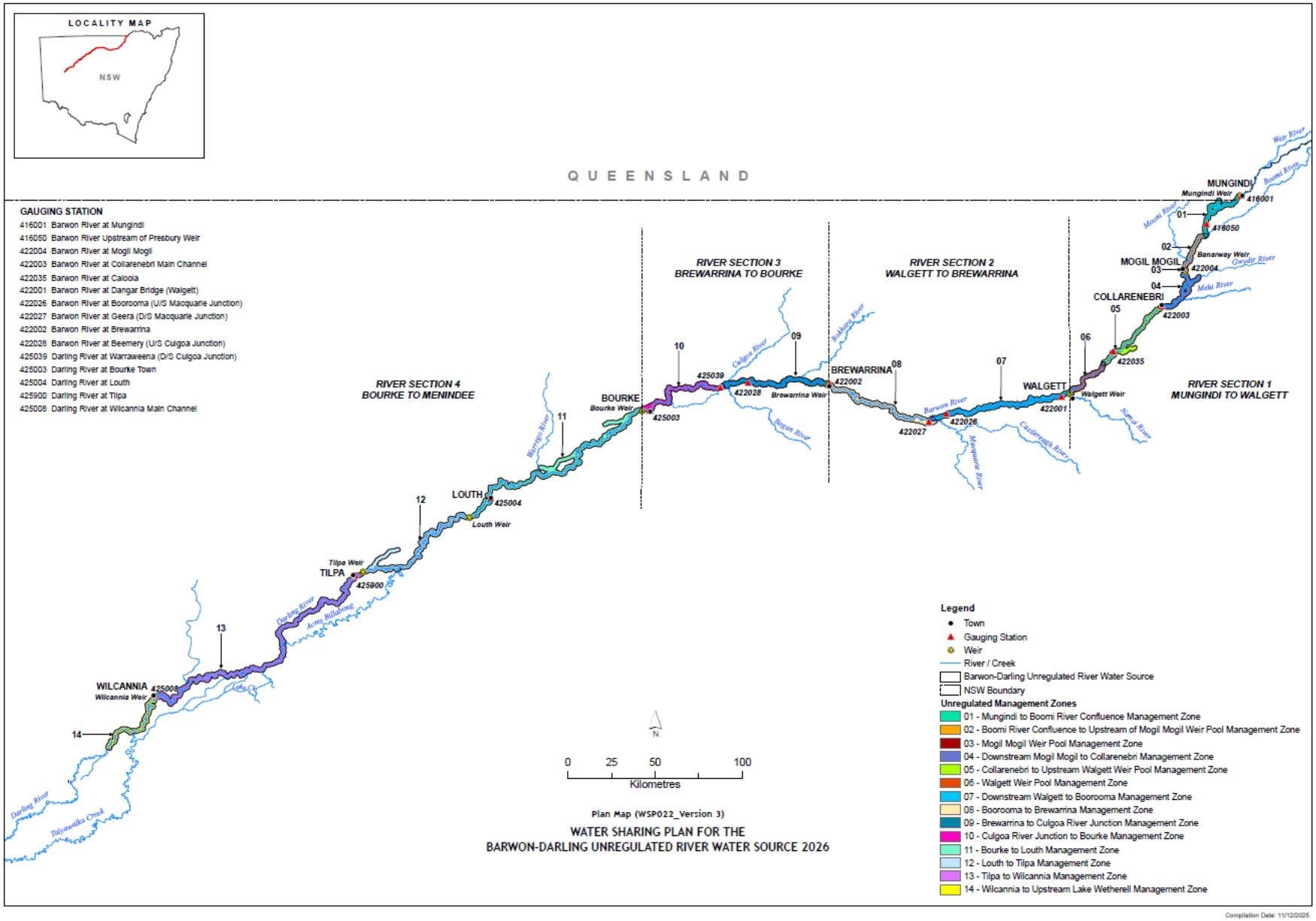


Table 1 and Table 2 give details of the potential levels of extraction for basic landholder rights (BLR) and licensed extraction from the Barwon Darling 2026 plan area. BLR also includes harvestable rights, which allow landholders to capture and store a proportion of the rainfall runoff from their landholding in harvestable rights dams without a water access licence, water supply work approval or water use approval. To learn more about harvestable rights visit the department's website.

Table 1 Estimated requirements for water in the Barwon Darling 2026 plan – Basic landholder rights

Extraction type	Potential extraction (ML/year)
Domestic and stock	283
Native title	The amount of water that may be taken in the exercise of Native Title rights in accordance with the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth)..
Harvestable rights	On the commencement of the Barwon Darling 2026 plan, the amount of water required to satisfy harvestable rights has not been estimated.

Table 2 Estimated requirements for water in the Barwon Darling2026 plan – Licensed extraction

Licensed extraction subcategory	Potential extraction (ML/year)
Domestic and stock	899
Local water utilities / town water supply	5,436
Unregulated river (A, B and C Class) access licences	188,671
Unregulated river	1,488
Floodplain harvesting (unregulated river)	51,322

5.2 Previous plans

The Barwon Darling 2012 plan commenced on 1 July 2012 and ended on 30 June 2025. The plan included rules for both surface water and alluvial groundwater. To meet requirements under the Basin Plan 2012, alluvial groundwater sources were separated from the Barwon Darling 2012 plan in 2020 and incorporated into the Darling Alluvial water sharing plan.

For more information on this plan, refer to the Barwon Darling 2012 plan background document.

When access rules in a water sharing plan change, licence holders are required to comply with the existing licence conditions until they are notified of updated licence conditions by receipt of a new Statement of Conditions. For further information see the factsheet – Complying with new or changed access rules.

5.3 Developing the 2026 water sharing plan

The processes that the department has used to develop the replacement plan are an update on the previous macro–planning approach.

Replacement plan development now follows the processes described in Replacement Water Sharing Plan Guide (PDF 1.32 MB).

The department is responsible for implementing the WM Act, including developing water sharing plans for NSW water resources. When drafting the Barwon Darling 2026 plan, we considered:

- the section 44 audits of the Barwon Darling 2012 plan
- recommendations from the NRC Review of the Barwon Darling 2012 plan
- updated data, information and science
- the deliberations across government agencies including the Water Group and Conservation Programs, Heritage and Regulation Group within the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development's Agriculture and Fisheries branches, Water NSW and the Natural Resources Access Regulator
- consultation with local water utilities, local government and water user representatives.

You can find the Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2026 on the department's website.

Details of the changes from the Barwon Darling 2012 plan are in Section 6 of this document.

You can find information on the public exhibition of the Barwon Darling 2026 plan in Section 5.4 of this document.

5.4 Public exhibition and finalising the 2026 plan

The department exhibited the draft Barwon Darling 2026 plan from 11 November to 10 January 2025.

We held an online public webinar attended by 17 people and 3 one-on-one phone calls with a water planner. A copy of the presentation and a recording of the webinar were published on the department's website following the webinar.

We discussed the plan and proposed changes with stakeholders at a face-to-face meeting in Bourke (4 attended).

We contacted WaterNSW customers via mail (395 letters) and other groups and individuals via email (278 recipients). These communications informed recipients of the plan replacement, ways to access information, and invited them to attend one of the public information sessions.

We received 29 written submissions about the draft plan. The public exhibition process and stakeholder submissions provided us with valuable feedback that helped to inform the final recommendations for the replacement plan. Issues raised in submissions are summarised in the What we heard document.

The submission period to comment on proposed wetland rules was extended to 2 February 2025. Following significant feedback about draft wetland rules received during public exhibition, the

department released a revised approach to proposed WSP prescribed wetland maps and rules for an additional 3-week period of comment between 4 and 23 March 2025. An additional webinar was held during this time. The feedback we received is summarised in the What we heard – WSP Prescribed Wetlands document on the department's website.

In finalising the replacement plan, the department considered submissions as well as further deliberations and input from government agencies including the Water Group and Conservation Programs, Heritage and Regulation Group from Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development's Agriculture and Fisheries branches, Water NSW and the Natural Resources Access Regulator.

Section 6 of this document details changes from the previous plan to the current plan.

6 Changes from the 2012 plan to the 2026 plan

6.1 Overview

Key drivers for the changes in the Barwon Darling 2026 plan were:

- the NRC's review recommendations
- contemporary water resource policy – some changes to the plan align it with current policy to help improve efficiency and consistency in achieving water resource management objectives across the state
- updated data and knowledge improvements
- consultation on the draft plan, feedback and submissions.

Changes to the plan reflect improved understanding and updated data. They aim to modernise and simplify the water sharing plan to make it easier to read while ensuring provisions are practical to implement and legally accurate.

Changes were made to:

- the general layout of the plan
- identification of planned environmental water provisions
- the vision, objectives, strategies, and performance indicators
- basic land holder rights estimates and access licence share components
- one flow reference point
- prohibit in-river dams, with an exemption for town water supply (TWS)
- adaptive management and amendment provisions.

For a summary of issues raised in submissions, regardless of whether they led to a change, please refer to the Outcomes of public exhibition section of the department's website and the relevant What we heard document on that page.

A rules summary sheet for the Barwon Darling 2026 plan is available on the department's website.

6.2 General layout changes

There are several l layout changes to the Barwon Darling 2026 plan. We have moved or reworded sections (formerly called clauses), but their intent is the same. The changes reflect current template styles and provide a more standard and consistent layout across the state's water sharing plans, as well as making the plan easier to understand.

For example, we have removed unnecessary notes and consolidated amendment provisions to the amendments part of the plan.

6.3 Identification of planned environmental water provisions

Planned environmental water (PEW) is a key component of water sharing plans. The Barwon Darling 2012 plan had discrete sections on PEW that pointed to other parts of the plan to identify where water is reserved for the environment. This included access rules.

Instead of having a separate section on PEW, the Barwon Darling 2026 plan includes rules associated with PEW in the relevant sections. Wherever a section of the plan relates to PEW, a note is included, pointing to the relevant section of the WM Act.

6.4 Vision, objectives, strategies and performance indicators

Part 2 of the Barwon Darling 2026 plan describes the vision and objectives. The plan's vision encompasses the overall aim of the plan. The vision of the plan is to provide for the:

- health and enhancement of the water sources and their water-dependent ecosystems
- continuing productive extraction of water for economic benefit
- spiritual, social, customary and economic benefits of water to Aboriginal communities
- social and cultural benefits to urban and rural communities resulting from water.

There are 5 objectives. They are to:

- protect and, where possible, enhance and restore the condition of the water sources and their water-dependent ecosystems,
- maintain and, where possible, improve access to water to optimise economic benefits for agriculture, water-dependent industries and local economies,
- maintain and, where possible, improve the spiritual, social, customary and economic values and uses of water by Aboriginal people,
- provide access to water to support water-dependent social and cultural values.

- maintain and where possible improve water quality within target ranges for the water source to support water quality, water-dependent ecosystems, and social, cultural and economic values.

We will include detailed and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) objectives in the Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting (MER) plan for the Barwon Darling 2026 plan. These will clearly link objectives, strategies and performance indicators. This addresses the NRC's recommendation to strengthen MER of the plan's outcomes.

We added a requirement for the Minister to prepare and publish a MER plan. The MER plan is to be published by 31 December 2026.

In each year the Minister is to publicly report on the implementation of the water sharing plan, including progress against the MER plan. Additionally, evaluation reporting is to be undertaken by year nine of the water sharing plan.

The annual reporting will provide transparency on the implementation of the MER activities, while the reporting in year 9 of the plan will provide transparency on how the plan's vision, objectives, strategies and performance indicators are being met.

6.5 Updated basic landholder rights estimates and licence share components

We have updated the estimate of extraction of water under BLR contained in Part 3 of the plan.

Since the development of the first water sharing plans, which began before 2003, numerous methods have been followed to estimate water requirements for domestic and stock BLR. These methods were superseded in 2010 by a standard NSW approach to support the development of surface and groundwater macro water sharing plans.

We adopted the same method used in the development of macro water sharing plans for estimating the water requirements of domestic and stock BLR. This method is in Appendix 5 of the Replacement Water Sharing Plan Guide.

The revised estimates may differ from those in the Barwon Darling 2012 plan because of changes in land use, population density and the availability of more accurate spatial data.

The updated water access licence share components (water entitlements for the water source) are listed in Part 3 of the Barwon Darling 2026 plan.

6.6 Changes to access rules

No changes to access rules have been made in the Barwon Darling 2026 Plan.

Active management rules are in place to protect active environmental water. These rules manage unregulated access when active environmental water is present.

6.7 Prohibit in-river dams with an exemption for town water supply

Water sharing plans contain specific rules relating to the construction and operation of in-river dams, including those built for town water supply (TWS).

Current policy prohibits the construction of new in-river dams in third or higher order streams in water sources identified as having high instream value or where such a prohibition is already in place in the current water sharing plan. Interagency discussions as part of plan replacements questioned the appropriateness of this policy on in-river dams because it restricts opportunities to improve TWS security.

The prohibition of in-river dams for water sources identified as having high environmental value remains, but we have allowed an exemption to the rule that would apply for new in-river dams built only for TWS purposes (supply to communities for domestic consumption and commercial activities). Permitting applications for in-river dams for TWS does not mean new dams are approved to proceed. An application for a water supply work approval is still required. Each application is assessed on its merit and may or may not be approved on this basis.

6.8 Protection of wetlands

In their review of the inland unregulated water sharing plans, the NRC recommended that the protection for significant wetlands be improved when plans are replaced. Significant wetlands may include internationally (Ramsar), and nationally and regionally significant wetlands (termed 'prescribed' wetlands) within the plan area. For some plans, this recommendation has been broadened to include culturally significant wetlands. The department considered options to improve the protection of significant wetlands during the plan replacement process.

Although referenced in the Barwon Darling 2026 Plan, there are no Ramsar listed sites or areas registered in the Directory of Important Wetlands of Australia within the Barwon Darling 2026 plan boundaries.

Over the next 12 months, we will continue to consult with landholders and the community on wetlands that were identified in the March 2025 revised maps as being from a Floodplain Management Plan Zone D. The Barwon Darling 2026 plan will then be amended before December 2026 to add any wetlands identified in Floodplain Management Plan Zone D, that after a closer look, are appropriate to have the wetland water supply work approval and trade rules applied.

6.9 Natural off-river pools

Natural off-river pools, such as lakes, lagoons and billabongs located on flood-runners, floodplains and effluents, provide important habitat and refuge during dry periods.

To be consistent with other inland unregulated water sharing plans, which already have rules around works and trading within off-river pools, the Barwon Darling 2026 plan prohibits:

- water supply works being constructed in a natural off-river pool, unless no more than minimal harm can be determined in accordance with published minimal harm guidelines, and
- the assignment of water allocations or share components into or between off-river pools.

These rules do not apply to replacement water supply work approvals.

Trades within the same off-river pool are permitted because they do not increase overall demand on the pool.

An exemption related to the assignment of allocations is provided for access licences where history of prior trade can be demonstrated.

6.10 Trade

Trade is an important tool for achieving both environmental and economic improvements. If trading rules are too restrictive, it limits the ability to move take out of high environmental value areas to lower environmental value areas, provides no flexibility for water users and hinders the establishment of a water market. Where water sources have medium to low environmental value and are not flow-stressed, trade should be permitted.

Trading covers assignment of rights dealings (trading of a licence), share component dealings (trading of entitlement), extraction component dealings (trade of daily flow shares and IDECs), water allocation dealings (trading an annual allocation) and water supply works dealings (relocation of an extraction point).

Table 3 Rules for trading into or within this water source

Type	Rules
Into water source	Not permitted.
Within water source	Permitted subject to specific rules. View Table 4. Prohibited into off-river pools.
Assignment of allocation (account water)	Permitted within the water source to another access licence that is subject to an equivalent or higher cease to take condition. Prohibited into off-river pools, unless assignment of allocation to the off-river pool has occurred during the term of the Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2012.
Between management zones	Permitted within a river section. Permitted between licences of the same category into a different river section provided the total shares in that section and class do not exceed the total limit specified in Table 4.

Type	Rules
Amendment of extraction component	Permanent trade of daily flow shares is permitted within a river section to licences that have the same or more restrictive take conditions as the seller. Temporary assignments (trade) of IDECs are permitted within a river section to licences that have the same or more restrictive take conditions as the seller[1]Water can only be accessed under IDECs that are temporarily traded when WaterNSW has announced access for both licences involved in the dealing.
Nomination of works	Prohibited if work is nominated by a licence listed in Schedule 2 at commencement of the plan. Prohibited if being amended to nominate a water supply work located within an off-river pool, unless the dealing will result in no more than minimal harm to the off-river pool. Prohibited if nominating a work in a river section would cause the total share in that section and class to exceed the total specified limit in Table 4.

Table 4 Limits for trading into or within this water source

River Section	A Class	B Class	C Class
1	3,434	82,940	26,040
2	2,535	38,282	114,197
3	13,515	126,019	34,344
4	5,860	38,246	44,720

6.11 Adaptive management and amendment provisions

Adaptive management means changing things in response to new information. During the life of a water sharing plan, this information may come from data collection and monitoring or from some other improvement in understanding. Such information could include socio-economic studies, hydrological modelling, ecological studies and information about Aboriginal cultural sites.

[1] Temporary trades of IDECs will not commence until WaterNSW systems have been upgraded to implement the trades.

Adaptive management is a requirement of both the WM Act and the National Water Initiative. The WM Act allows for changes to a water sharing plan during its life if it is in the public interest. The plan also allows for amendments during its life as described in Part 10 of the plan.

Examples of adaptive environmental water provisions in the new plan include the ability to amend:

- to add, remove or modify the access rules that apply to the take of water from in-river pools, off-river pools and in-river dam pools,
- to add or modify flow classes, flow reference points and surface water access rules in response to changes in water availability by amending Part 6, Divisions 2–4 and Schedule 2,
- stormwater harvesting,
- total daily extraction limits,
- individual daily extraction components,
- floodplain harvesting (unregulated river) access licences,
- the facilitation of active management to share flows,
- to protect water-dependent Aboriginal cultural assets, including as follows —
  - by identifying water-dependent Aboriginal cultural assets,
  - by establishing new flow classes or access rules
  - by establishing new access licence dealing rules,
- to give effect to, or in connection with, a determination of native title under the *Native Title Act 1993* of (Cth).
- to modify Schedules 3, 4 or 5.
- to add or modify flow classes, flow reference points and surface water access rules for the Boorooma to Brewarrina Management Zone in the water source following a study that shows to the satisfaction of the Minister that the current access rules are having an adverse impact on the Aboriginal cultural value of the fish traps at Brewarrina, provided that —
  - such amendments do not apply to domestic and stock access licences and local water utility access licences, and
  - the Minister has consulted with relevant Government agencies and stakeholders,
- to modify access rules that apply to supplementary water (Aboriginal environmental) access licences,
- to give effect to the review described in subsection (3) of Part 10 of the plan,
- to change the volume of water in Menindee Lakes Storage specified in section 43(3), following the replacement of the Water Sharing Plan for the New South Wales Murray and Lower Darling Regulated Rivers Water Source 2016 if there is a change in the Menindee storage volume requirements to protect the Lower Darling water sources and their dependent ecosystems,
- to prescribe wetlands, including —
  - to add maps identifying the prescribed wetlands, and
  - to add provisions relating to prescribed wetlands,

By 31 December 2026, the Minister is to review the following —

— resumption of flow rules in section 42,

— the restrictions on the take of overland flow in section 43,

— the flow classes in Schedule 2, Table A,

for the purpose of improving connectivity between water sources and plan areas to protect water dependant ecosystems, considering the recommendations of the Connectivity Expert Panel.

The Minister may amend this plan to give effect to the findings of:

— the sustainable LTAAEL review under section 20(3) and

— a review before 1 July 2028 of wetlands and appropriate rules to protect and, where possible, enhance the ecological integrity of ecologically significant wetlands and off-river pools in the plan area.

7 Amendments made to the 2012 plan

Over the life of the Barwon Darling 2012 Plan, the plan was amended 7 times. Some of these corrected typographical errors and, others added clarity. More substantial amendments were made in 2020 and 2023 due to changes in policy. The 2020 changes to incorporate active management and resumption of flow rules are detailed in sections 7.1 and 7.2.

For example, the amendments in 2023 included:

- floodplain harvesting provisions
- allowing the temporary trade of individual daily extraction components (IDECs)
- allowing for the amendment of access announcements
- allowing forecast flow data at both reference gauges to be used to make flow class announcements when one of those gauges is not working
- clarifying how the cumulative flow trigger that relaxes the resumption of flows rule works
- other minor administrative changes.

More details of the 2023 amendments can be found in the fact sheet Changes to the Barwon-Darling water sharing plan.

7.1 Active management

Active management rules help protect active environmental water from extraction in unregulated systems by limiting the daily extraction, adjusting access thresholds when environmental water is present, and providing clarity on access through announcements. The Barwon Darling 2012 plan was amended in 2020 to include active management rules.

Details on how active management works is included in the Active Management in Unregulated Rivers Policy, and the specific rules for the Barwon Darling plan area are included in the plan and the Active Management Procedures Manual – Barwon Darling.

7.1.1 Individual daily extraction components

Individual daily extraction components (IDECs) were introduced as part of the amendments to the Barwon Darling 2012 plan in 2020. The provisions for IDECs have been carried forward to the 2026 WSP including temporary and permanent IDEC trade.

An IDEC is the daily volume of water that may be extracted under an individual water access licence after commence-to-pump (CtP) thresholds have been reached. These CtP thresholds may be adjusted and the daily extraction volume reduced to protect environmental water. A water access licence includes the share the owner has available to them (called the share component) and the times, rates, circumstances and locations the water can be taken (called an extraction component).

More details on IDECs can be found on the department's website.

7.2 Resumption of flow rules

Resumption of flow rules were introduced as part of the amendments to the Barwon Darling 2012 plan in 2020. These rules protect the critical first flows of water after an extended dry period of low or no flow. The resumption of flow rule is first activated during a dry period through a set of flow conditions (activation triggers) at one or more of the 4 gauges across 4 river sections. Once one or more of the activation triggers have been met, licence holders in that river section and the upstream river section(s) are prevented from taking water.

When flows recommence, a set of flow conditions for each river section or a cumulative flow target at Wilcannia (relaxation triggers) must be met for licence holders in that river section and the downstream river section(s) to start taking water again.

The provisions for resumption of flows have been carried forward to the Barwon Darling 2026 WSP.

7.2.1 Triggers for activating and relaxing the resumption of flow rule

The resumption of flow rule is applied in river sections. If licence holders in a river section are prevented from taking water, all licence holders in the river sections upstream are also prevented from taking water. This is to protect flows that could contribute to the downstream river sections. The triggers for activating the resumption of flow rule (activation triggers) are shown in Table 5. For each river section, these values are equivalent to 200 ML/day for 90 days at Wilcannia. If **any** of the activation triggers for a river section are met, the resumption of flow rule is activated for that river section and the Minister will make a 'no flow class[2]' announcement.

[2] A no flow class announcement means all licence holders cannot take water

Table 5 Triggers for the resumption of flows rule in each river section in the Barwon Darling 2026 plan

Restriction trigger	Section Mungindi to Walgett	Section 2 Walgett to Brewarrina	Section 3 Brewarrina to Bourke	Section 4 Bourke to Wilcannia
326 ML/day for 150 days at Walgett	Yes	No	No	No
468 ML/day for 150 days at Brewarrina	Yes	Yes	No	No
450 ML/day for 120 days at Bourke	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
200 ML/day for 90 days at Wilcannia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The resumption of flow rule is relaxed for a river section when either the specified flow conditions (relaxation triggers) are forecast to occur at the gauges for that river section and all downstream river sections **or** when a total cumulative flow of 30,000 ML (or 30 GL) is forecast to pass Bourke since the activation trigger for Wilcannia was last met. The flow conditions for each of the gauges are the equivalent of 400 ML/day at Wilcannia for 10 days. The relaxation triggers are shown in Table 6.

If **all** of the relaxation triggers for a river section are forecast to be met **or** a total cumulative flow of 30 GL will pass Bourke since the activation trigger for Wilcannia was last met, the resumption of flow rule is relaxed for that river section and normal access conditions apply.

The rule was amended in 2023 to clarify that the 30 GL flow trigger in the Darling River at Bourke represents a cumulative total flow, which begins accumulating on the first day after flows at Wilcannia have been below 200 ML/day for more than 90 consecutive days (the activation trigger for river section 4). This amendment means the cumulative total at Bourke is reset if the activation target for river section 4 is met within a current period of take being prevented in river section 4.

Table 6 Relaxation triggers for the resumption of flows rule in each river section in the Barwon Darling 2026 plan

Relaxation trigger	Section 1 Mungindi to Walgett	Section 2 Walgett to Brewarrina	Section 3 Brewarrina to Bourke	Section 4 Bourke to Wilcannia
706 ML/day for 10 days at Walgett	Yes	No	No	No

Relaxation trigger	Section 1 Mungindi to Walgett	Section 2 Walgett to Brewarrina	Section 3 Brewarrina to Bourke	Section 4 Bourke to Wilcannia
1008ML/day for 10 days at Brewarrina	Yes	Yes	No	No
972 ML/day for 10 days at Bourke	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
400 ML/day for 10 days at Wilcannia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The cumulative flow past Bourke is forecast to be greater than 30 GL*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Note: If the **cumulative flow past Bourke** is forecast to be greater than 30 GL, this supersedes all relaxation threshold rules and restrictions are relaxed.[3]

7.2.2 Examples of the resumption of flow rule

The following section provides 2 worked examples to show how the resumption of flow rule is intended to operate.

Example 1

Table 7 demonstrates which river sections will be prevented from taking water when the activation triggers are met.

Table 7 River sections where take is not permitted when activation triggers are met

River section	Below 326 ML/day for 150 days at Dangar Bridge (Walgett)	Below 468 ML/day for 150 days at Brewarrina	Below 450 ML/day for 120 days at Bourke Town	Below 200 ML/day for 90 days at Wilcannia
River sections where take not permitted	1	1 and 2	1, 2 and 3	1, 2, 3 and 4

[3] The flow trigger of 30 GL in the Darling River at Bourke is a cumulative total flow. Flows start contributing to the 30 GL target from the start of the most recent low-flow or dry period, when flows have been less than 200 ML/day for more than 90 consecutive days at Wilcannia.

In this example, the following flows have been recorded over the last 150 days:

- 312 ML/day at Walgett
- 462 ML/day at Brewarrina
- 456 ML/day at Bourke, and
- 225 ML/day at Wilcannia.

Based on Table 7, the activation triggers in Walgett and Brewarrina have been met and consequently a 'no flow' announcement is made preventing licence holders in river sections 1 and 2 from taking water.

In the example, the flow rates slightly increase over several months until the following flows are recorded over a 10-day period:

- 812 ML/day at Walgett
- 1100 ML/day at Brewarrina
- 1212 ML/day at Bourke, and
- 440 ML/day at Wilcannia.

Based on the information presented in Table 6, the relaxation triggers have been met for all river sections and take is now permitted for licence holders in river sections 1 and 2 with normal access conditions applying. Licence holders in river sections 3 and 4 were not impacted by the resumption of flow rule in this example.

Example 2

In this example shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, the resumption of flow rule is triggered for all river sections, as the flow at Wilcannia has been less than 200 ML/day for 90 consecutive days. A 'no flow class' announcement is made and take is not permitted for all licence holders in all river sections.

The rule is relaxed for all river sections on day 158 because 30,000 ML is forecast at Bourke since the most recent suspension.

Figure 2 Resumption of flow rule worked example 2 - Part A

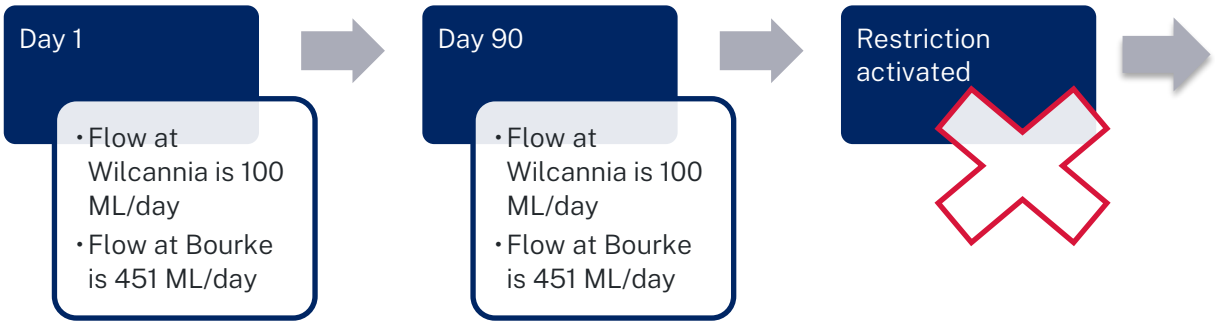
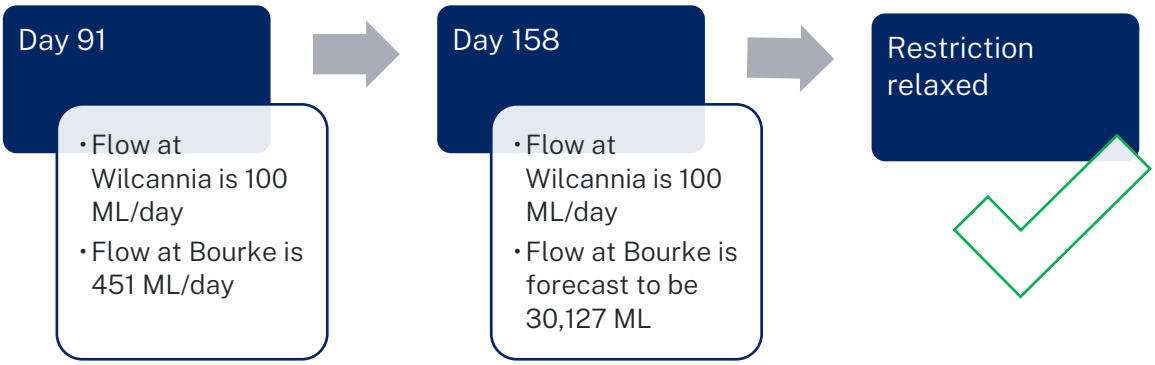


Figure 3 Resumption of flow rule worked example 2 - Part B



8 Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting (MER) are key components to adaptive management. They ensure that water sharing plans are effective in meeting their objectives.

Comprehensive MER programs are resource-intensive and long term. We must prioritise areas where there is a high risk of water extraction affecting environmental assets or where the demand for water is relatively high compared to the volume of water available.

The department is working on a project to prioritise water sources for MER activities, based on risk in areas that have high levels of extraction, ecological value or stakeholder needs.

The MER plan is a framework specifically designed for the water sharing plan and will follow established guidelines. The MER plan will be published by 31 December 2026. Under new provisions in the Barwon Darling 2026 plan, in each year the Minister will publicly report on the implementation of the plan, including progress against the MER plan. The department will also conduct evaluation reporting by year 9 of the Barwon Darling 2026 plan's term.

9 Areas for further work

9.1 Metering and record keeping

The NSW Government's non-urban water metering framework, initiated in December 2018, aims to ensure the fair and equitable sharing of water among users, enhancing transparency and efficiency in water management across the state. The framework's implementation was staged to allow water users, suppliers, and installers sufficient time to achieve compliance. The NSW Government has recently completed a review of the non-urban metering rules and has updated the Water Management (General) Regulation 2025 to make compliance quicker, easier and more cost effective.

The new metering rules require water users to assess their compliance requirements using their total entitlement and work size. Large water users must comply with the highest metering standards, whilst smaller water users now have less prescriptive metering requirements. There are also measurement/metering obligations for unregulated river access licence holders that take overland flow which are aligned with the floodplain harvesting measurement requirements.

Water users are encouraged to consult the department's non-urban metering website for detailed information and updates. To verify individual access licence details, please refer to the WaterNSW Water Register.

Until December 2018, water sharing plans used estimates of water usage when assessing risks and developing rules. These estimates were based on published pump performance, average river height stages, pumping rates agreed by the licence holder and records of pump operating times. Modern electronic meters may improve the accuracy of water take.

9.2 Long-term average annual extraction limit

In NSW, all water sharing plans include long-term average annual extraction limits (LTAAELs). These limits are designed to protect water resources, dependent ecosystems, and communities from the impacts of over-extraction in the longer term.

Calculation of long-term average annual extraction

LTAAELs are calculated annually, based on the historic climatic data (therefore recalculated annually), and using a hydrological computer model approved by the Minister.

Each year the calculation considers:

- the water storages (if applicable) and water use development
- the basic landholder rights and access licence share components
- the rules in this plan or in the water sharing plan that applied in that water year.

Assessment of LTAAEL compliance for inland unregulated water sources will use metering data once 3-5 years of metering data is available. Prior to then, the department will use remote sensing to undertake a risk assessment to determine if there is a risk of extraction exceeding the limits in unregulated water sources. When the non-urban metering requirements are fully implemented, metering data will cover up to 90% of water take across NSW. The department will develop a method to fill the remaining gaps in metering data for LTAAEL compliance purposes.

Additionally, we added a requirement for the Minister to review the numerical LTAAEL, including seeking the advice of the NRC. The review requirements will help ensure that the LTAAEL reflects a sustainable level of take.

We also added a requirement for the Minister to consider the 'minimum inflows' review and enabled amendments to be made to the plan based on that review.

9.3 Cultural flows and improving the involvement of First Nations people in water management

The department will work toward the priorities in the NSW Water Strategy. Priority 2 of the NSW Water Strategy is to Recognise First Nations/Aboriginal people's rights and values and increase access to and ownership of water for cultural and economic purposes.

The NSW Government recognises First Nations/Aboriginal peoples' rights to water and our aim is to secure a future where water for First Nations/Aboriginal people is embedded within the water planning and management regime in NSW, delivering cultural, spiritual, social, environmental and economic benefit to communities.

Actions under the NSW Water Strategy include:

- strengthening the role of First Nations/Aboriginal people in water planning and management
- developing a state-wide Aboriginal water strategy
- providing for Aboriginal ownership of and access to water for cultural and economic purposes
- working with First Nations/Aboriginal people to improve shared water knowledge
- working with First Nations/Aboriginal people to maintain and preserve water-related cultural sites and landscapes.

The department is committed to providing greater opportunities for Aboriginal water management and participation in water sharing. A new Aboriginal water directorate has been established within the department, and has released an Aboriginal Water Strategy, which identifies the ways in which we can achieve the priorities under the NSW Water Strategy. The department has established advisory Regional Aboriginal Water Committees in each of the NSW water regions and piloted some cultural watering plans in various parts of NSW.

9.4 Stormwater harvesting

The department is developing a stormwater harvesting policy to determine the best way to manage stormwater extraction to maximise the benefits of reusing stormwater and reducing erosion of waterways while ensuring adequate water is available for the environment and water users.

9.5 Climate change

Australia has a highly variable climate, and rainfall is especially variable. This makes it vital that we understand as much as we can about our climate so we can work out how we should manage our water supplies. The frequency and duration of wet and dry events determine how much water we have available.

NSW is already experiencing trends of higher-than-average temperatures and reduced cool season rainfall. There are indications from climate models that drought conditions may become more frequent and severe, and last longer.

Higher demand from a growing population, alongside reductions in supply, will increase water scarcity, putting more pressure on all users, including the environment (Productivity Commission, National Water Reform Issues Paper, May 2020, p.2). We must collectively improve our understanding of these risks to better manage water supply and ensure that our operational, planning and future development decisions take future water reliability and security into account.

The department has developed river models that incorporate stochastic long-term data to help guide regional water strategies. We can use these models to inform water sharing decisions as they are developed across the state. For example, as we develop the sustainable LTAAELs, we will consider the future effects of climate change.

Priority 4 of the NSW Water Strategy is to increase resilience to changes in water availability (variability and climate change). The strategy's implementation plan looks to improve and apply our understanding of climate variability and change. This includes work to determine a methodology and progressively incorporate climate risk data into water sharing plan and environmental water management decision making.

Additionally, the department will consider the outcomes of a current work program informing maintenance of water supply in inland regulated river systems. This is a key piece of work in relation to climate considerations within plans.

10 Appendix A – References and supporting documents

- NSW Legislation website contains NSW legislation, including the WM Act
- National Water Initiative
- Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated River Water Source 2026
- The background document and rule summary sheets for the Barwon Darling 2026 plan
- Barwon Darling 2026 plan map
- Details of the macro planning approach:
  - Macro water sharing plans - approach for unregulated rivers (PDF 829KB)
  - Macro water sharing plans – access and trading rules for pools (PDF 627 KB)
- The Natural Resources Commission's Review of the Barwon Darling 2012 water sharing plan