

Committee on Investment, Industry and
Regional Development



LEGISLATIVE
ASSEMBLY

Impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW Regional Communities



Report 3/58 – April 2026

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The motto of the coat of arms for the state of New South Wales is “Orta recens quam pura nites”. It is written in Latin and means “newly risen, how brightly you shine”.

Cover photo: Darling River at Wilcannia, taken by Jerson Balaton, August 2025.

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Membership

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Chair's foreword

Water management in the Murray-Darling Basin is one of the most contested policy issues facing NSW. The health of the Basin is vital to the economic, environmental, cultural and social wellbeing of regional communities across NSW. Despite successive water reforms at federal and state level, we continue to see environmental disasters and water reforms are making it harder for communities to access the water they need.

In considering any further water reforms, it is important that governments consider the needs of irrigated agriculture as well as downstream communities. Getting the balance right between these competing, but equally legitimate interests is critical to successful Basin policy.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan is an agreement between the Australian Government and Basin state governments. It is intended to achieve a balance of uses for the environment and people, but it is falling short of its targets and objectives. Environmentalists and irrigators alike are not satisfied with the direction of water reforms.

With the passage of the *Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023* by the Australian Parliament, the Australian Government restarted its controversial water buyback program and made other significant changes to how the Basin Plan is implemented. Basin communities are concerned about losing access to water, and are worried about potential harm to local economies.

This inquiry sought to understand the impact of water reforms, and the views of Basin communities to make findings and recommendations about how the framework can be improved. We heard diverging views on reforms to date, and on potential solutions.

Buybacks have significantly impacted towns, particularly those smaller towns that depend on agriculture. When the water goes, businesses leave, schools close, and eventually the people go elsewhere. Water is the lifeblood of these communities.

To their credit, the NSW Government recognises that buybacks pose a risk to these communities; it opposes the use of further buybacks. However, it lacks tools to stop the Australian Government from buying licences. NSW must continue to advocate for alternatives to buybacks. One alternative the Committee recommended is to explore the possibility of water leases instead of buybacks. These short-term leases could provide environmental benefits without permanently removing water from the productive pool.

Water rules introduced by the NSW Government, such as cease-to-pump rules and minimum pumping heights, were of concern to irrigators. They worry that their licences will become less reliable, and that rules will be used as water recovery by stealth.

The Committee heard that there is no accurate understanding of the total amount of water that has been recovered across NSW from all water reforms to date. In other words, no-one knows exactly how much water has been recovered for the environment. We recommended that during the review of the Basin Plan, the NSW Government incorporate up to date modelling on water volumes and allocations impacted by rules-based changes.

There needs to be greater transparency and accountability in the administration of the regulatory framework. Irrigators need to understand the impact of rules-based changes on their operations.

Basin communities face many challenges. Fish kills continue to occur, algae outbreaks are common, some towns risk running out of clean drinking water, and water quality is poor across the Basin. We recommend several alternatives to address these problems in water management. The current approach that focuses on water volumes is lacking.

Poor progress on water quality was a key gap in the management framework identified by many stakeholders. While there is a lot of diverging views on buybacks, most stakeholders agree we need to address water quality and also the mass of invasive European carp. Addressing these two issues will significantly improve the health of the Basin and the communities that rely on it. The NSW Government must commit renewed funding to improve water quality, drinking water resources and address the carp in our waterways.

The Committee heard about the economic reality of regional communities bearing the brunt of policy and regulatory changes. While there are programs to minimise those impacts, this help is not reaching communities that need it in an effective way. The sustainable communities program should be administered through a genuine co-design process to deliver effective and ongoing economic support to where it is needed most.

This inquiry reinforced the reality of the challenges facing the Murray-Darling Basin. Policies and programs under the Basin Plan are falling short of commitments to support regional communities while environmental impacts continue. The NSW Government must improve the way it consults people during reform to bring regional communities into the process and draw on their experiences.

We all have an interest in protecting our water resources and ensuring they are managed in a way that sustains the industries and communities that support the NSW economy. As well as delivering environmental outcomes.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank everyone who made a submission or appeared as a witness at the public hearings in regional NSW including Broken Hill, Narrabri, Griffith, Deniliquin, Bourke, Wilcannia and Menindee. This evidence provided us with valuable insights on water regulations and policy. We hope that our findings and recommendations support positive reforms and provide some comfort to regional communities that their voices will influence policy going forward.

I also thank all members of the Committee for their commitment to this inquiry. This is a complex policy issue, and I appreciate their time and hard work in seeking to improve regional communities.

The work of this inquiry was complex, and required Committee members and the secretariat to learn lots of new information to inform the inquiry. Particularly the secretariat. I thank them and acknowledge their work and support.



Roy Butler MP
Chair

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Chapter One – The need for improved water management in the Murray-Darling Basin

Summary: The declining health of Murray-Darling Basin has affected communities and the environment. Stakeholders disagreed on the cause of this decline, with over extraction of water acknowledged by some.

Water scarcity has caused environmental issues in the Murray-Darling Basin

1.1 The health of the Murray-Darling Basin has been under pressure for many years. The NSW Government submitted that the main risks to the water resources of the Basin include climate change, drought and extreme events, land use changes in catchments, competition between water users and invasive species. This in turn has caused reduced river flows, habitat destruction, reduced water availability and decline in water quality.¹

Over extraction of water has harmed the health of the Basin

1.2 The Committee received evidence that over extraction of water from the Basin was an issue.² The Environmental Defenders Office Australia submitted that there is a long history of unsustainable levels of extraction and use across the Basin. This threatens water resources and the ecosystems, industries and communities that rely on them.³ The National Parks Association of NSW noted that water use has increased over time as agriculture, industries and communities grow.⁴

1.3 Over extraction has been linked to environmental impacts, including species decline and habitat loss.⁵ Lower river flows cause major environmental problems such as algae outbreaks, salinity and loss of vegetation.⁶ Healthy Rivers Lower Murray submitted that over-extraction has caused fish kills, algal blooms and salination.⁷ Fiona Dyer, Member and Past Chair, Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Network told us that the river not functioning correctly was causing the extinction of fish.⁸

1.4 Another impact of over extraction is reduced river flows across the Basin. The Pastoralists' Association of West Darling submitted that over recent decades the

¹ [Submission 31](#), NSW Government, p 3.

² Arthur Davies, Member, Wilcannia Tourism Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, pp 2-3; [Submission 66](#), Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, p 1; Environmental Defenders Office Australia, [Answers to written questions](#), 14 January 2026, p 1-2;

³ Environmental Defenders Office Australia, [Answers to written questions](#), 14 January 2026, p 1.

⁴ [Submission 62](#), National Parks Association of NSW, p 2.

⁵ [Submission 62](#), p 4; [Submission 66](#), p 1; [Submission 19](#), Healthy Rivers Lower Murray, p 2.

⁶ [Submission 62](#), p 2.

⁷ [Submission 19](#), p 2.

⁸ Fiona Dyer, Member and Past Chair, Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Network, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 3.

frequency and volume of flows down the Darling River has been significantly reduced.⁹

- 1.5 Indigenous people living in the Basin have experienced the declining health of its rivers. Cassidy Kennedy, Chair, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, grew up on and along the Darling River/Baaka and observed that people can no longer fish for food. He says the biggest reason for this, in addition to carp, is the amount of extraction and pressure on the system.¹⁰ Rhonda Hynch, Chair, Wilcannia Community Working Party and Barkandji Prescribed Body Corporate Ranger, told us she has seen the river decline since she was a child.¹¹
- 1.6 Some irrigator and agricultural groups acknowledge the issue of over extraction. The NSW Irrigators' Council said that over-extraction has been a concern in the past for inland catchments.¹² Madeleine Hartley, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Irrigators' Council told us that from her perspective, water was certainly over allocated in the 80's and 90's across NSW. However, she told us that since then, through reductions to entitlements, 'irrigators have given back a lot of that water.'¹³

Some stakeholders disagreed that there were environmental impacts from over extraction

- 1.7 Other stakeholders downplayed concerns about the environment.¹⁴ Richard Bottle, Chair, Water Taskforce, NSW Farmers, said that environmental health in the Basin has improved, sustainable diversion limits are in place and over 70 per cent of flows remain in the environment.¹⁵
- 1.8 Murray River Council said the rivers are alive and well and there are only two issues impacting them, one of those being carp and the other poor policy impacting river operations.¹⁶

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan, the *Water Act* and the *Restoring our Rivers Act*

Summary: To address issues with water allocation, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan was adopted. The latest amendment to the Basin Plan is the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023. It makes adjustments to the targets for recovering water for the environment and extends the timeline to deliver this water. It also repeals a previous cap on the volume of water buybacks.

⁹ [Submission 66](#), p 1.

¹⁰ Cassidy Kennedy, Chair, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 9.

¹¹ Rhonda Hynch, Chair, Wilcannia Community Working Park and Barkandji Prescribed Body Corporate Ranger, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 12.

¹² [Submission 83](#), New South Wales Irrigators' Council, p 34.

¹³ Madeleine Hartley, Chief Executive Officer, New South Wales Irrigators' Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 27.

¹⁴ [Submission 25](#), Murray River Council, p 3.

¹⁵ Richard Bootle, Chair, Water Taskforce, NSW Farmers, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 15.

¹⁶ [Submission 25](#), p 3.

The *Water Act 2007*, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, and the Intergovernmental Agreement are the framework for water policy

- 1.9 The *Water Act 2007* (Water Act) is the key federal law regulating the water resources in the Basin. It seeks to return to sustainable levels of water extraction in the Basin, and maximise economic, social and environmental outcomes.¹⁷ It sets out the role of the Australian Government in implementing the Basin Plan and performing functions under the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement.¹⁸
- 1.10 The Basin is also managed under the Basin Plan and the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Murray-Darling Basin (IGA).

The Restoring Our Rivers Act made significant changes to the management of the Basin

- 1.11 The *Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023* (Restoring Our Rivers Act) made significant changes to the Water Act and the Basin Plan. Those changes provide for more time, options, funding and accountability to deliver the objectives of the Basin Plan and achieve the remaining water recovery targets.¹⁹
- 1.12 The Restoring Our Rivers Act provided more time to achieve the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) projects and expanded the options that could be used to achieve water recovery targets. The key changes included:
- expand the type of measures that can be used to achieve the additional recovery of 450 billion litres of water per year, or 450 GL/y of water to include buybacks²⁰
 - require consideration of socio-economic impacts before approving further water purchases towards the 450 GL/y target
 - extend the deadline to achieve the 450 GL/y target
 - repeal the 1,500 GL/y cap on Australian Government water purchases
 - extend the deadline for completion SDLAM projects with existing projects to be delivered by 31 December 2026
 - other regulatory changes such as strengthened enforcement and compliance powers.²¹

¹⁷ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Water laws in Australia](#), accessed 23 February 2026.

¹⁸ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [Accountability and reporting](#), accessed 23 February 2026.

¹⁹ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Restoring Our Rivers Act 2023](#), accessed 12 February 2026.

²⁰ Note: one gigalitre is one billion litres, Sydney Harbour has a capacity of around 500 GL.

²¹ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Restoring Our Rivers Act 2023](#), accessed 17 February 2026; Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Framework for delivering the 450GL](#), accessed 10 April 2026.

1.13 The central strategy of the Basin Plan is to reduce water use to sustainable levels by setting an overarching water recovery target of 3,200 gigalitres per year (GL/y). This target is made up of smaller targets:

- 70 GL/y reduction through the Northern Basin Review
- 605 GL/y through the sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism (SDLAM)
- residual recovery of 2,075 GL/y, the 'bridging the gap target' through the use of sustainable diversion limits (SDL)
- 450 GL/y for enhanced environmental outcomes.²²

Table 1: The targets that make up the 3,200 GL/y water recovery target in the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

2,075 GL/y Bridging the gap target	70 GL/y northern Basin toolkit	605 GL/y SDLAM	450 GL/y Enhanced Environmental Outcomes
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1.14 One program that contributes to recovering the 450 GL/y of water for enhanced environmental outcomes is the Voluntary Water Purchase program, otherwise known as buybacks. When water is bought by the government from water licence holders, it is held and used as environmental water. Buybacks are discussed further in Chapter 2.

1.15 The Water Act established the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH), which is responsible for managing the Australian Government's environmental water holding portfolio.²³ The CEWH uses this water to achieve environmental outcomes.²⁴

NSW has its own regulatory framework for water and is responsible for meeting Basin Plan targets

1.16 In NSW, water resources are regulated by the *Water Management Act 2000* (Water Management Act). Regulation involves water allocation, planning and licencing decisions. This is achieved mainly through Water Sharing Plans and licensing. This licensing framework is designed to ensure 'sustainable and equitable use of water resources.'²⁵

1.17 Under the Basin Plan, NSW is responsible for managing water resources in accordance with Basin Plan objectives and principles of the IGA. In NSW, Water Sharing Plans (WSPs) are prepared under the Water Management Act. WSPs are statutory instruments that regulate how water is shared between different uses. These WSPs inform the development of Water Resource Plans (WRP) which are

²² Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Implementing the Plan](#), accessed 23 February 2026.

²³ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [The Water Act](#), accessed 11 February 2026.

²⁴ Dr Simon Banks, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 10.

²⁵ [Submission 31](#), p 10.

accredited by the Australian Government to ensure compliance with Basin targets.²⁶

- 1.18 NSW supports full implementation of the Basin Plan.²⁷ However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the NSW Government does not support the recovery of water through buybacks.

Water recovery under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan to date

Summary: It is unclear how much water has been recovered through reforms to date. There is a need for improved accounting of water recovery from all water reforms.

Finding 1

It is not clear how much water in the Murray-Darling Basin has been recovered for the environment through water reforms introduced to date.

Recommendation 1

That the NSW Government advocate that the review of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan incorporates up to date modelling on water recovery levels and the impacts of rules-based changes on available water reliability.

- 1.19 Understanding how much water has been recovered is critical to assessing the effectiveness of water reforms. It is difficult to estimate total volumes of water recovered to date, although both levels of government undertake regular accounting.
- 1.20 It is not clear that the NSW Government is accurately recording and communicating how protecting environmental water may impact water availability and reliability for water users such as irrigators.

Stakeholders had competing estimates on how much water has been recovered to date

- 1.21 The NSW Government submitted that it has recovered more than its share of the overall bridging the gap target of 2,075 GL/y. It noted that the NSW portion of that target is 989.2 GL/y and as of 31 December 2024, 1,033 GL/y has been recovered, although recovery targets have not been met in some valleys.²⁸ They also said that since 2020 their actions have protected over 2,300 GL of environmental water. This is comprised of 1,653 GL in the southern Basin from policy measures and temporary water restrictions and 721 GL in the northern Basin from active management.²⁹
- 1.22 Other stakeholders raised different figures. Dr Jonathan Howard, National Parks Association of NSW referred to a Senate hearing to tell us that a total of 2,100 GL/y has been recovered for the environment which accounts for about 20 per

²⁶ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [How water sharing plans work](#), accessed 11 March 2026.

²⁷ [Submission 31](#), p 2.

²⁸ [Submission 31](#), p 1.

²⁹ NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to questions on notice](#), 28 November 2025, p 1.

cent of all flows in the Basin.³⁰ Murrumbidgee Irrigation said that a total of 2,132.7 GL/y has been recovered as of 30 September 2024.³¹

- 1.23 It is also unclear how much water in total has been recovered when considering the combination of recovery strategies, programs and policies. This uncertainty was raised during the inquiry, and the Committee was unable to determine the total volumes recovered from the combination of all recent policy and legislative changes.

The total volumes of water recovered from all policies and programs to date is unknown

- 1.24 When asked about the cumulative total of water recovered from rules-based changes, flow targets and other programs, stakeholders said they did not know and could not give a definitive figure.³² For example, Johanna Barnard, Manager, Sumar Produce, said that it's 'very difficult to get that information' about how much water is allocated to the environment and how much has been recovered.³³
- 1.25 Some people argued there has been over recovery. Michael Drum, Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre said that as we have reached recovery targets, the question is more about how environmental water managers are held to account for its use.³⁴
- 1.26 Soroptimist International Griffith Inc said accounting for water from efficiency projects, buybacks and harvesting is not accurate.³⁵
- 1.27 Similarly, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association argued that water recovery in the Gwydir has exceeded legislative requirements.³⁶ They did not want to see additional recovered water counting as environmental water and contributing to the 450 GL/y target.³⁷
- 1.28 Namoi Water are concerned that over recovered water could be used towards the 450 GL/y target. They oppose the use of this water towards water saving targets, saying it would be water theft by the Australian Government.³⁸

³⁰ Dr Jonathon Howard, National Parks Association of NSW, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 4. See: Andrew McConville, Chief Executive, Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [Transcript of evidence](#), Parliament of Australia, Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, Estimates, 7 October 2025, p 97.

³¹ [Submission 60](#), Murrumbidgee Irrigation, p 7.

³² Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 20; Tom Green, Chair, New South Wales Irrigators' Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 23.

³³ Johanna Barnard, Manager, Sumar Produce, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 15.

³⁴ Michael Drum, Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 38.

³⁵ [Submission 22](#), Soroptimist International Griffith Inc, p 1.

³⁶ [Submission 23](#), Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, p 11.

³⁷ [Submission 23](#), pp 13-14.

³⁸ [Submission 45](#), Namoi Water, p 4.

Reviews of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan should incorporate up to date accounting of the total water volumes recovered for the environment

- 1.29 Further reviews of the Basin Plan should focus on improving the accounting of water recovery. This must account for the changes in flow regimes and availability of water from non-recovery methods such as rules-based changes.
- 1.30 Basin communities need accurate information regarding water availability to improve trust in Basin management. Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia, said that the NSW Government has not taken into account the impact of all the additional water that has been recovered under the Basin Plan.³⁹
- 1.31 The Water Act requires the Murray-Darling Basin Authority to review the Basin Plan in 2026. This Basin Plan Review has commenced with the release of a discussion paper and is open for public consultation and feedback. The purpose of the review is to make recommendations to Basin governments on whether it is providing for the integrated management of the Basin's water resources.⁴⁰
- 1.32 This review should incorporate up to date modelling of the cumulative total of water recovered to date from all programs and reforms including rules-based changes, buybacks, efficiency programs and other restrictions on water use. Future NSW water reform should also be informed by this holistic understanding of total volumes of water recovered to date.

Balancing the competing interests in Murray-Darling Basin resources continues to be a challenge

Summary: Water management policy is contentious, with a need to balance recovery of water for the environment with the needs of agriculture. Some stakeholders believed recovering water for the environment was less important than other concerns, such as water quality.

Finding 2

Water management in NSW is contentious. Complex policy solutions are needed to address ongoing environmental issues while minimising economic and social impacts.

Recommendation 2

That the NSW Government continue to investigate water management solutions to address the environmental and social impacts of ecological decline across catchments of the Murray-Darling Basin.

- 1.33 The Committee acknowledges that balancing competing demands on water use from agriculture, communities and environment is difficult. Stakeholders had varying views on the importance of water for the environment. Other issues that stakeholders considered important included water quality and ensuring the agricultural productivity of the Basin.

³⁹ Michael Murray, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 17.

⁴⁰ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [2026 Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper](#), p ix.

- 1.34 Elizabeth Mead, Secretary, Soroptimist International Griffith Inc., told us that water for the environment is important and water for growing food and fibre is also important.⁴¹ Similarly Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, said water is always going to be contested and some will always think more should go to the environment and some think more should be for consumptive use.⁴²
- 1.35 The Committee heard that issues like water quality and carp are a risk to the environmental health of the Basin and their communities.⁴³ Mitchel Isaacs said that the two things that are the biggest failings in Basin policy are fish health and water quality.⁴⁴ Several regional stakeholders argued water quality is of equal importance to water quantity.⁴⁵
- 1.36 Some stakeholders thought water recovery was ineffective, describing it as a 'just add water' approach.⁴⁶ Inverell Shire Council said the amendments introduced by the Restoring Our Rivers Act entrenches achieving volumetric conditions when an adaptive plan is needed for the management of the Basin.⁴⁷
- 1.37 The Committee was told that there is doubt about the effectiveness of some water policies. Tony Thompson, irrigator, said there had been a lot of changes to flow rules and water has been taken from irrigators. He was unsure if this has improved environmental outcomes.⁴⁸ Likewise, Councillor Lachlan Ford, Mayor, Bourke Shire Council, said having fresh water in the river and connectivity is important. He questions the science behind the importance of flowing rivers as the fish kills occur even when the river is flowing.⁴⁹
- 1.38 The Committee were also informed that enough water has been recovered for the environment and no further recovery is needed.⁵⁰ The Committee was

⁴¹ Elizabeth Mead, Secretary, Soroptimist International Griffith Inc., [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 30.

⁴² Mitchel Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 5.

⁴³ Councillor Shari Blumer, Chair and National President, Murray Darling Association (Region 9), and Councillor, Griffith City Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, pp 17-18; Christine Freak, Water Policy Consultant to Murrumbidgee Irrigation, and Managing Director, Riviere Consulting Pty Ltd, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 39; Councillor Lachlan Ford, Mayor, Bourke Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 4.

⁴⁴ Mitchel Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 4.

⁴⁵ [Submission 22](#), p 2; [Submission 88](#), Murray Darling Association (Region 9), p 2; Johanna Barnard, Manager, Sumar Produce, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, pp 16-17.

⁴⁶ [Submission 67](#), Griffith Business Chamber, p 4; [Submission 72](#), Murray Irrigation, p 2; [Submission 96](#), Central Murray Environmental Floodplains Group Inc, p 19; Roger Knight, Executive Officer, Western Murray Land Improvement Group, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 29; Councillor George Weston, Mayor, Leeton Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 6; Justin Sutherland, Non-Executive Member Director, Coleambally Branch, Ricegrowers' Association of Australia, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 27; Michael Turnell, General Manager, Legal and Regulatory Services, Murrumbidgee Irrigation, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 34; Richard Bootle, Chair, Water Taskforce, NSW Farmers, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 15; Tom Green, Chair, New South Wales Irrigators' Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 24; Madeleine Hartley, Chief Executive Officer, New South Wales Irrigators' Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 27.

⁴⁷ [Submission 89](#), Inverell Shire Council, p 3.

⁴⁸ Tony Thompson, Irrigator, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, pp 21-22.

⁴⁹ Councillor Lachlan Ford, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 4.

⁵⁰ [Submission 96](#), Central Murray Environmental Floodplains Group Inc, p 18.

informed that water recovered for the environment has negatively impacted agricultural communities across NSW. And that there has been enough progress against water recovery targets.⁵¹ Sophie Baldwin, Chief Executive Officer, Southern Riverina Irrigators, said that farmers are also environmentalists and are not against environmental watering, but believes that the 'pendulum has definitely swung too far to one side.'⁵²

- 1.39 The Committee heard concerns that water policy reforms are undermining the agricultural productivity of the Basin. Richard Bootle said that the impacts of decades of water reform were not being addressed and the long-term productivity of agriculture in NSW was under threat.⁵³

Indigenous communities should be involved in water governance

Summary: First Nations are particularly impacted by water issues in the Basin, and hold important local and cultural knowledge about the Basin. Indigenous communities should be consulted and involved in shaping water policy.

Recommendation 3

That the NSW Government improves how it consults and engages with Aboriginal communities on water management and policy reform to ensure Aboriginal people can actively shape outcomes that support their interests in water.

- 1.40 The Committee is of the view that the way governments engage with First Nations communities in water policy can be improved. The meaningful participation of these communities is important to support Indigenous water rights and governance.
- 1.41 Aboriginal communities hold important local knowledge about the Basin's environments which should be recognised and integrated into water management. The NSW Aboriginal Land Council said there is a need to better recognise and promote the role of Aboriginal people in water management and ownership.⁵⁴
- 1.42 The health of Aboriginal communities is intimately linked with the health of river systems. As Krystle Evans, Senior Project Officer at the Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council told us that there is socio-economic evidence that shows the link between people's health and water.⁵⁵ The NSW Aboriginal Land Council submitted that 'In times of drought, the health issues in particular escalate due to a lack of water or poor quality.'⁵⁶

⁵¹ [Submission 82](#), NSW Farmers, p 5-6; Christine Freak, Water Policy Consultant to Murrumbidgee Irrigation, and Managing Director, Riviere Consulting Pty Ltd, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, pp 35-36.

⁵² Sophie Baldwin, Chief Executive Officer, Southern Riverina Irrigators, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 19.

⁵³ Richard Bootle, Chair, Water Taskforce, NSW Farmers, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 15.

⁵⁴ [Submission 34](#), NSW Aboriginal Land Council, p 1.

⁵⁵ Krystle Evans, Senior Project Officer, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 8.

⁵⁶ [Submission 34](#), p 2.

- 1.43 Aboriginal people are particularly impacted by water issues in the Basin. The NSW Aboriginal Land Council argued it's unacceptable that Aboriginal communities do not have access to clean and safe drinking water or access to their sites on rivers and lakes. They want to see stronger efforts to return land and water to Aboriginal people in recognition of their rights and interests.⁵⁷ Dan Schulz, PhD Researcher, said that water crises in the Darling River/Baaka have resulted in immense losses which impacts the water sovereignty of Aboriginal communities as their economic and cultural status is linked closely with flow dependent environments.⁵⁸
- 1.44 Healthy rivers are important for First Nations communities, including their wellbeing and ability to exercise their cultural and native title rights. As Leroy Johnson, Chair, Barkandji Native Title Group Aboriginal Corporation said, 'If the river is healthy, that means we can exercise our native title rights on that river.'⁵⁹
- 1.45 Cassidy Kennedy said flows down the river are important so people can do their traditional practices and teach their kids.⁶⁰ Culture and identity for Barkandji people is intimately connected with the Baaka:

The word Barkandji means "river people". We belong to the river. Without the river, we don't have identity or a culture. It means everything to us, the river.⁶¹

Consultation with Indigenous communities is done poorly

- 1.46 The Committee heard there are limited opportunities for Indigenous people to engage in water governance. Cassidy Kennedy said they do not really get consulted about things happening in their community impacting water and he would like to be part of the changes and planning. He said his community could be part of helping to build knowledge about the river.⁶²
- 1.47 Leroy Johnson, Chair, Barkandji Native Title Group Aboriginal Corporation, said that governments have left native title holders out of discussions or improvements about their river, the Baaka. He said there has been no consulting on water sharing plans, and no water allocated for native title in that water sharing plan.⁶³ Although he did say that consultation with government is improving.⁶⁴
- 1.48 Consultation and engagement should be meaningful. Krystle Evans said there has been consultation on water, but if community feedback is not taken on board, then it becomes tokenistic. She said people have been regularly consulted and

⁵⁷ [Submission 34](#), p 2.

⁵⁸ [Submission 106](#), Dan Schulz, p 2.

⁵⁹ Leroy Johnson, Chair, Barkandji Native Title Group Aboriginal Corporation, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 19.

⁶⁰ Cassidy Kennedy, Chair, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 8.

⁶¹ Cassidy Kennedy, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 8.

⁶² Cassidy Kennedy, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 9.

⁶³ Leroy Johnson, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 19.

⁶⁴ Leroy Johnson, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 20.

attend meetings, always asking for the same thing to ensure a healthy river but the talk has not led to change or a holistic approach to managing waterways.⁶⁵

1.49 Arabella Douglas, Chief Executive Officer, Currie Country Social Change, submitted that water reform cannot be effective while it continues to exclude First Nations people. She said that the State is not taking action with First Nations governance bodies which reduces the opportunity for those communities to engage in river, ecological and land management systems.⁶⁶

1.50 Arabella Douglas also argued First Nations people have limited opportunity for meaningful engagement on water rights as it is not genuinely recognised in legislation. She said that the Water Act denies First Nation's voices in decision-making and fails to provide for free prior and informed consent (FPIC) during water allocation decisions. She then argued this marginalisation of voices violates domestic legal rights and Australia's obligations under international law.⁶⁷

Indigenous communities should be actively involved in shaping water policy

1.51 The NSW Aboriginal Land Council argued for increasing the participation of Aboriginal communities in water policy and integrating traditional ecological knowledge into river restoration and water management. They said that Aboriginal communities have long been excluded from decision making and their participation must be increased at all levels of management across the Basin.⁶⁸ One recommendation they made was that initiatives to support Aboriginal water rights be designed in partnership with Aboriginal controlled community organisations.⁶⁹

1.52 Effective partnership requires genuine co-design. Dan Schulz talked about the importance of co-design in the management of Menindee lakes. He said that the local community and the bureaucracy should work together on how to manage it as an environmental and cultural asset.⁷⁰

1.53 NSW Farmers told us that they support the participation of Aboriginal people as water users and recognise that their use of productive water should be no different to other entitlement holders.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Krystle Evans, Senior Project Officer, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, pp 9-10.

⁶⁶ Arabella Douglas, Chief Executive Officer, Currie Country Social Change, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 20.

⁶⁷ [Submission 84](#), Currie Country Social Change, pp 1-2.

⁶⁸ [Submission 34](#), p 3.

⁶⁹ [Submission 34](#), p 3.

⁷⁰ Dan Schulz, PhD Researcher, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 17.

⁷¹ [Submission 82](#), p 10.

Chapter Two – The impacts of water buybacks

Summary: The Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 includes key changes expanding the use of water buybacks. It changed the way the Australian Government intends to achieve water savings and outlines the current status of the new buyback program.

Finding 3

Water buybacks have been concentrated in some areas and have had negative socio-economic impacts in all regions and towns, and undefined environmental outcomes.

Recommendation 4

That the NSW Government continue to oppose water buybacks in NSW until the socio-economic impacts in affected regions and other options for water recovery have been explored.

The Restoring Our Rivers Act 2023 is resulting in more water buybacks

2.1 The Committee received evidence of broad opposition and concern about the prospect of further water buybacks. Agricultural stakeholders and some regional communities expressed worry that further buybacks will result in negative impacts. They said as previous rounds of buybacks impacted communities, further buybacks would negatively affect their agricultural industries. However, this concern was not shared by all stakeholders. Other organisations expressed support for further buybacks and recovering more water for the environment.

Water recovery targets under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan

2.2 The Murray-Darling Basin Plan (Basin Plan) functions to reduce the amount of water being taken out of the rivers to support environmental, social and cultural values across the Basin. It set sustainable diversion limits (SDLs) to limit how much water can be used by towns and communities for farms and industries while protecting rivers and the environment.⁷²

2.3 The Basin Plan sets out two broad water recovery targets; firstly to return water use to sustainable levels and secondly to enhance environmental outcomes.

- the first target is known as the 'bridging the gap target' which sets water use targets at sustainable levels by reducing the total amount of water that can be extracted.
- the second target known as the Enhance Environmental Outcomes target is 450 GL/y.⁷³

⁷² Australian Government, [Murray Darling Basin Authority, Sustainable diversion limit accounting and reporting framework](#), accessed 16 January 2026.

⁷³ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [How we recover water in the Murray-Darling Basin](#), accessed 4 March 2026.

Table 2: the 2,0575 GL/y Bridging the gap target and 450 GL/y Enhanced Environmental Outcomes target.

2,075 GL/y Bridging the gap target	70 GL/y northern Basin toolkit	605 GL/y SDLAM	450 GL/y Enhanced Environmental Outcomes
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- 2.4 A key water recovery tool used to achieve these water savings are buybacks. Buybacks involve the Australian Government buying water from licence holders that are willing to sell their entitlements. These licences are held as environmental water that is managed by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH), for the benefit of rivers and the environment.⁷⁴
- 2.5 This environmental water is periodically released down rivers and creeks to achieve environmental objectives by flushing the system and supporting habitats. There has already been an extensive program of buybacks over the course of the Basin Plan, which has seen the recovery of more than 1,259 GL/y for the environment as of 30 September 2025.⁷⁵ The Murray-Darling Basin Authority provides quarterly reports on the progress of water recovery.⁷⁶
- 2.6 The *Water Act 2007* initially capped the amount of water that could be bought by the government. The Restoring Our Rivers Act removed this 1,500 GL/y cap on buybacks so more water could be bought. It also gave the Australian Government the ability to use buybacks to recover water towards the 450 GL/y target.⁷⁷

Changes to the socio-economic neutrality test

- 2.7 The Restoring Our Rivers Act changed the way that potential socio-economic impacts of buybacks are assessed. Under the Basin Plan, previous buybacks were subject to the socio-economic neutrality test.⁷⁸
- 2.8 The Restoring Our Rivers Act modified this so that instead of requiring buybacks towards the 450 GL/y target to have a neutral socio-economic impact, the Australian Minister for the Environment must consider the social and economic impact before approving buybacks.⁷⁹ This means that future buybacks are not subject to the socio-economic neutrality test in the Basin Plan and the Australian Government will instead invest in impacted Basin communities.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Australian Government water purchasing in the Murray-Darling Basin](#), accessed 4 March 2026.

⁷⁵ Murray Darling Basin Authority, [Progress on water recovery summary table – 30 September 2025](#), published 19 November 2025, accessed 9 December 2025, p 1.

⁷⁶ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [Answers to written questions](#), 14 January 2026, p 2.

⁷⁷ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Restoring Our Rivers Act 2023](#), accessed 4 March 2026.

⁷⁸ Restoring Our Rivers Act, [Explanatory memorandum](#), p 4.

⁷⁹ *Water Act 2007 (Cth)* s 86ADB.

⁸⁰ Restoring Our Rivers Act, [Explanatory memorandum](#), p 4.

The current status of buybacks

- 2.9 The Australian Government is using buybacks to recover water towards the 450 GL/y target. While the Commonwealth supports further buybacks, the NSW Government does not.
- 2.10 NSW opposes the use of buybacks to recover more water. This is outlined in their Alternative to Buybacks policy.⁸¹ It advocates for the Australian Government to prioritise investment in water recovery through projects, programs and infrastructure to achieve the Basin Plan objectives.⁸²
- 2.11 Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), told us that the NSW Government does not support buybacks but it does support the implementation of the Basin Plan.⁸³ He said while there is little the NSW Government can do to stop buybacks, they can influence how the Commonwealth implements buybacks. This is to ensure there are appropriate programs in place to support impacted communities in NSW.⁸⁴
- 2.12 The Australian Government has progressed two Expressions of Interest programs for the purchase of water licences across the southern Basin. As of February 2026 a total of 189.6 GL/y is contracted or agreed to be purchased under the Voluntary Water Purchase program⁸⁵ They are also considering purchasing water from the northern part of the Basin.⁸⁶ There are 280 GL/y that still needs to be recovered to meet the full 450 GL/y target.⁸⁷
- 2.13 The NSW Government said as there has only been a small number of purchases it is too early to determine the actual social, economic and environmental impacts of repealing the cap on buybacks. They also said there are many studies, economic analyses and diverging views on the potential impact of water purchases towards the 450 GL/y target.⁸⁸

Many regional communities are concerned about the social and economic impacts of buybacks

Summary: There is broad opposition from regional groups about further buybacks. They are worried about negative impacts on their communities and economies. Stakeholders told the Committee that buybacks reduce agricultural and economic activity and harm regional NSW.

⁸¹ NSW Government, [NSW Alternatives to Buybacks Plan](#), accessed 11 December 2025.

⁸² [Submission 31](#), NSW Government, p 4.

⁸³ Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 7.

⁸⁴ Mitchell Isaacs, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 7.

⁸⁵ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Voluntary Water Purchase Program for the 450 GL \(Restoring our Rivers\)](#), 28 November 2025, accessed 11 December 2025.

⁸⁶ Melissa Clarke, [Push to return 130GL of water to Murray-Darling Basin sparks backlash](#), 13 November 2025, accessed 11 December 2025.

⁸⁷ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Progress on Murray Darling Basin water recovery](#), accessed 21 January 2025.

⁸⁸ [Submission 31](#), NSW Government, p 6.

Groups that support buybacks believe they are needed to improve environmental outcomes. They believe that the negative impacts of buybacks has been overstated.

There is broad concern about the impact of more buybacks

- 2.14 There are a diversity of views on the best way to achieve the outcomes of the Basin Plan. The Committee was told there is significant concern over the prospect of further buybacks.
- 2.15 Stakeholders discussed the negative impacts they experienced from earlier rounds of buybacks under the Basin Plan.⁸⁹ Robbie Sefton, Founder, Sefton and Associates Pty Ltd, noted buybacks are deeply contentious, causing social and economic harm. He also noted that there are other water management solutions to meet environmental targets without sacrificing agricultural production.⁹⁰
- 2.16 Organisations from impacted regional communities said they are still recovering from previous buybacks.⁹¹ Councillor Darrel Tiemens, Mayor, Narrabri Shire Council, said that his Council opposes broad-based buybacks because they have 'seen firsthand the devastation they leave behind'.⁹²
- 2.17 Groups expressed their support for the NSW Government position opposing further buybacks.⁹³ Paul Serra, CEO, SunRice Group, urged the NSW Government to take a stronger stance with the Australian Government to pause buybacks and allow time for industries to evolve.⁹⁴ John Nikolic, President, Griffith Business Chamber, said NSW should advocate for no buybacks until all the alternatives are implemented.⁹⁵
- 2.18 The Committee heard that the possibility of further buybacks is affecting regional communities and their trust in the Australian Government.⁹⁶ Ms Leonie Brown, General Manager, Bourke Shire Council, said from a community perspective they are very nervous about the impact of further buybacks on their community.⁹⁷
- 2.19 Other arguments against buybacks raised by stakeholders included:

⁸⁹ Jack Bond, Chief Executive Officer, Edward River Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 2; Trevor Clark, President, Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 25; Jackie Kruger, General Manager, Leeton Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 7; Tom Kennedy, Mayor, Broken Hill City Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 2; Councillor Ethan Towns, Narrabri Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 4.

⁹⁰ Robbie Sefton, AM, Founder, Sefton and Associates Pty Ltd, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 11.

⁹¹ Trevor Clark, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 25; Sacha Free, Deniliquin Local Aboriginal Land Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 33.

⁹² Councillor, Darrel Tiemens, Mayor, Narrabri Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 2.

⁹³ [Submission 25](#), Murray River Council, p 4; [Submission 67](#), Griffith Business Chamber, p 3.

⁹⁴ Paul Serra, Chief Executive Officer, SunRice Group, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 18.

⁹⁵ John Nikolic, President, Griffith Business Chamber, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 32.

⁹⁶ Jeff King, Chair, Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 36; John Nikolic, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 29.

⁹⁷ Ms Leonie Brown, General Manager, Bourke Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 4.

- buybacks are not required as further water recovery is unnecessary for the health of the river⁹⁸
- they inflate water prices and increase volatility in the water market⁹⁹
- they create sovereign risk¹⁰⁰
- it leads to population decline as families move to find employment¹⁰¹
- makes water delivery more expensive.¹⁰²

Organisations argued buybacks reduce agricultural productivity

2.20 Many organisations including irrigator groups, agricultural groups, local councils and individuals oppose buybacks.¹⁰³ They argued that there are negative economic and social impacts from buybacks as they reduce agricultural production and economic activity.¹⁰⁴

2.21 The NSW Irrigators' Council said that reports from the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and Frontier Economics shows a similar trend that 'water recovery through buybacks has a negative impact on regional towns that rely on irrigated agriculture.'¹⁰⁵ Councillor Lachlan Ford, Mayor of Bourke Shire Council, referred to previous losses in the irrigation industry due to buybacks and said:

Should the industry take another hit, the entire local community will also take another hit that it can ill afford.¹⁰⁶

2.22 Some agricultural groups argued that buybacks create investment uncertainty and reduce productivity.¹⁰⁷ Jeff King, Chair, Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, said that the value of lost farm gate return for cotton due to current and future

⁹⁸ [Submission 25](#), p 3.

⁹⁹ [Submission 26](#), Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council Inc, p 12; [Submission 33](#), Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited, p 2.

¹⁰⁰ John Nikolic, President, Griffith Business Chamber, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 29.

¹⁰¹ [Submission 29](#), Country Women's Association of NSW, p 1.

¹⁰² [Submission 32](#), Southern Riverina Irrigators, p 7.

¹⁰³ [Submission 1](#), Mr Lewis Pierotti, p 1; [Submission 2](#), Ms Deidre Howard, p 1; [Submission 4](#), Mr Aaron Taylor, p 1; [Submission 6](#), Ms Sarah Edwards, p 1; [Submission 7](#), Mrs Edna Penning, p 1; [Submission 10](#), Mrs Kristina Irvine, p1; [Submission 11](#), Ms Susan Braydon, p 1; [Submission 12](#), Mr Paul Rogerson, p 1; [Submission 16](#), Ms Gen Campbell, pp 1-2; [Submission 17](#), Mr Douglas McWilliam, p 1; [Submission 26](#), p 12; [Submission 32](#), Southern Riverina Irrigators, p 7; [Submission 45](#), Namoi Water, p 5; Councillor Ashley Hall, Mayor, Edward River Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 2; Tom Kennedy, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 2.

¹⁰⁴ [Submission 25](#), p 4; [Submission 29](#), p 1; Jackie Kruger, General Manager, Leeton Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 7; Susannah Tymms, General Manager, Sustainable Dairy, Dairy Australia, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 17; Griffith City Council, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 12 August 2025, p 2.

¹⁰⁵ [Submission 83](#), New South Wales Irrigators' Council, p 7.

¹⁰⁶ Councillor Lachlan Ford, Mayor, Bourke Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 3.

¹⁰⁷ [Submission 61](#), Ricegrowers' Association of Australia, p 1; [Submission 101](#), SunRice Group, p 5; Laurie Arthur, Chair, SunRice Group, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 21; Sophie Baldwin, Chief Executive Officer, Southern Riverina Irrigators, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 22.

buybacks could result in an economic loss of between \$450 million to \$600 million a year, depending on how much water is recovered.¹⁰⁸

- 2.23 Susannah Tymms, General Manager, Sustainable Dairy, Dairy Australia, talked about the use of models to predict the impact of further buybacks on the dairy industry which showed under different pathways dairy farms were predicted to be worse off.¹⁰⁹
- 2.24 Some stakeholders referred to the 'swiss cheese' effect where the viability of infrastructure is undermined by the removal of water from the system.¹¹⁰ Ron McCalman, Chief Executive Officer, Murray Irrigation Limited, said that people exiting irrigation causes disruption and the remaining irrigators need to pick up the costs to operate those irrigation systems.¹¹¹ Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council explained that when water is sold, the remaining irrigators are left to maintain the infrastructure assets but with less water available.¹¹²

Groups opposed changes to socio-economic impact assessment

- 2.25 Stakeholders referred to changes to the socio-economic neutrality test for purchases towards the 450 GL/y target as a reason for concern about socio-economic harm.¹¹³
- 2.26 Councillor Ruth McRae, Mayor, Murrumbidgee Council, and Chair Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, said that one of their priorities is to reinstate genuine socio-economic testing before decisions are made about buybacks.¹¹⁴
- 2.27 Others were critical of the adequacy of this socio-economic impact assessment and say the impacts are being understated.¹¹⁵ Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation noted that the legislation is not clear on how the minister will assess those impacts, which means decisions may erode the reliability and value of their entitlements without adequate scrutiny or compensation.¹¹⁶ Namoi Water said that they could not find a single example where further recovery towards the 450 GL/y target delivers neutral or positive socio-economic outcomes.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁸ Jeff King, Chair, Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 37.

¹⁰⁹ Susannah Tymms, General Manager, Sustainable Dairy, Dairy Australia, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 16-17.

¹¹⁰ [Submission 45](#), p 3; [Submission 32](#), p 7; [Submission 53](#), Mr Richard Ham, 9; [Submission 83](#), p 10; Councillor Doug Curran, Mayor, Griffith City Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, pp 13-14; Dr Jonathon Howard, National Parks Association of NSW, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 6.

¹¹¹ Ron McCalman, Chief Executive Officer, Murray Irrigation Limited, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 22.

¹¹² Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 6 August 2025, p 1.

¹¹³ [Submission 33](#), p 3; Elizabeth Mead, Secretary, Soroptimist International Griffith Inc., [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 30; Bobbie Pannowitz, President, Leeton Business Chamber, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 33-34.

¹¹⁴ Councillor Ruth McRae, Mayor, Murrumbidgee Council, and Chair Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 7.

¹¹⁵ [Submission 60](#), Murrumbidgee Irrigation, p 21.

¹¹⁶ Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 19 August 2025, p 1.

¹¹⁷ Namoi Water, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 13 November 2025, p 16.

Buybacks may have had negative economic and social impacts in regional NSW

- 2.28 Irrigation dependent communities are impacted when water is removed from production. Christine Freak, Water Policy Consultant to Murrumbidgee Irrigation, and Managing Director, Riviere Consulting Pty Ltd, said over the course of water reforms, one in three litres of irrigation water once available for agriculture has now shifted to the environment. While this has achieved positive environmental outcomes, she said it has come at a cost to communities which have had to go through significant transitions in water availability.¹¹⁸
- 2.29 Regional councils were particularly worried about the consequences for their communities.¹¹⁹ Councillor Ruth McRae, Mayor, Murrumbidgee Council, and Chair Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, spoke to the cumulative social and economic impacts of buybacks in her region which she said are significant and ongoing.¹²⁰ Councillor John Harvie, Mayor Murray River Council, similarly said:
- Anything that hurts irrigators hurts our local economy and hurts our urban areas.¹²¹
- 2.30 Lower agricultural productivity reduces overall economic activity in those areas.¹²² Councillor Lachlan Ford, Mayor of Bourke Shire Council, said that Bourke and the surrounding shire has been significantly impacted by surface water diversions and buybacks. He has seen a 42 per cent decline in population since 2000, which in his opinion is a result of the buyback processes.¹²³
- 2.31 Stakeholders provided examples of specific economic losses from buybacks. Louise Gall, Executive Officer, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, referred to a loss of potentially \$450 million from one community alone.¹²⁴ Edward River Council said that the 2020 Independent Assessment of Social and Economic Conditions in the Basin reported that between 2001 to 2016 and across 40 communities in the Basin, approximately 10,801.5 full time equivalent jobs were lost, 30 per cent of these directly attributable to water recovery.¹²⁵

Buybacks have had a greater impact in specific areas

- 2.32 Water licences have been bought from regions across NSW, however they were concentrated in the Southern Basin. These irrigation based economies talked about being particularly impacted.¹²⁶ Murray River Council said that the Murray

¹¹⁸ Christine Freak, Water Policy Consultant to Murrumbidgee Irrigation, and Managing Director, Riviere Consulting Pty Ltd, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, pp 35-36.

¹¹⁹ Councillor Ashley Hall, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 2;

¹²⁰ Councillor Ruth McRae, Mayor, Murrumbidgee Council, and Chair Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, pp 7-8.

¹²¹ Councillor John Harvie, Mayor, Murray River Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 43.

¹²² [Submission 32](#), p 6; Tom Kennedy, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 2; Terry Smith, Senior Vice President, Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 9.

¹²³ Councillor Lachlan Ford, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 2.

¹²⁴ Louise Gall, Executive Officer, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 36.

¹²⁵ Edward River Council, [Answers to questions on notice](#), p 1.

¹²⁶ [Submission 26](#), p 12; John Harvie, Mayor, Murray River Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 41.

Region has carried the burden of buybacks and that it cannot sustain any further removal of water from the productive pool.¹²⁷

- 2.33 The Deniliquin Business Chamber said further buybacks are a 'callous' hit to communities that are adapting to the impact of earlier water purchases. They said uncertain and disproportionate buybacks risk loss of agency for Basin communities.¹²⁸ Elizabeth Mead, Secretary, Soroptimist International Griffith Inc., talked about the town of Griffith being based on irrigation. This meant that the community had limited capacity to adapt to the impacts of buybacks.¹²⁹
- 2.34 Richard Bootle, Chair, Water Taskforce, NSW Farmers, said that buybacks are the bluntest of tools. He went on to say that there should be investment in projects that do not just add more water where it's clear that adding water is not delivering further environmental impacts.¹³⁰ NSW Farmers submitted that they 'do not support any water recovery, be that through buybacks or other measures, towards the 450 GL/y target'.¹³¹

Buybacks are supported by some groups to recover more water

- 2.35 Buybacks and the use of environmental water have played an important role in improving environmental outcomes across the Basin.¹³² Several organisations support the use of further buybacks.¹³³
- 2.36 Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association submitted that they have seen the benefits of buybacks. They want to see ongoing investment to recover even greater volumes of water.¹³⁴
- 2.37 Groups supporting buybacks say they are economically efficient, voluntary and compensated.¹³⁵ The National Parks Association of NSW said that as many inland rivers are over-allocated, the most cost effective means of water recovery are voluntary buybacks.¹³⁶
- 2.38 People in Far West NSW expressed the strongest support for buybacks.¹³⁷ Dan Schulz, PhD Researcher, said that buybacks are broadly supported by community

¹²⁷ [Submission 25](#), p 3.

¹²⁸ Deniliquin Business Chamber, [Answers to questions on notice](#), 12 September 2025, pp 1-2.

¹²⁹ Elizabeth Mead, Secretary, Soroptimist International Griffith Inc., [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 30.

¹³⁰ Richard Bootle, Chair, Water Taskforce, NSW Farmers, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 16.

¹³¹ NSW Farmers, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 19 December 2025, p 2.

¹³² Dr Simon Banks, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 10; [Submission 100](#), Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, p 2; Environmental Defenders Office Australia, [Answers to written questions](#), 14 January 2026, p 1.

¹³³ [Submission 66](#), Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, p 1; [Submission 98](#), Nature Conservation Council of NSW, p 6; [Submission 100](#), p 3; Gary Mooring, Vice President, Louth Chamber of Commerce, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 9.

¹³⁴ [Submission 100](#), p 3.

¹³⁵ [Submissions 19](#), Healthy Rivers Lower Murray, pp 1-2; [Submission 34](#), NSW Aboriginal Land Council; [Submission 49](#), Professor Sarah Wheeler *et al*, [Submission 62](#), National Parks Association of NSW, p 3.

¹³⁶ [Submission 62](#), p 4.

¹³⁷ [Submission 66](#), p 1; Luke Driscoll, Chief Executive Officer, Barkandji Native Title Group Aboriginal Corporation, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 19.

members in Far Western NSW.¹³⁸ He argued buybacks play a part in restoring the river and was concerned that NSW opposition to buybacks does not allow for cooperation with the Australian Government to ensure buybacks result in flows for the Baaka/Darling River.¹³⁹

2.39 Mr Leroy Johnson, Chair, Barkandji Native Title Group Aboriginal Corporation, said that:

the buybacks we think are a good thing because it results in more water in the system, which results in a healthier system for our people.

2.40 Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, said there are potentially a huge range of positive effects and farmers can choose what to do with the proceeds from the sale.¹⁴⁰ She identified several indirect and direct benefits to buybacks including:

- agricultural benefits by increasing flexibility, reducing debt and enabling diversification
- benefiting communities by creating jobs and supporting recreational, fishing and tourism outcomes
- providing indirect economic values in the Basin from improved water quality and supporting ecosystem services like carbon sequestration and reduced salinity.¹⁴¹

2.41 Quambone Pastoral Co. Pty Ltd also stated there are positive economic impacts as water is only being bought from willing sellers, the value of the remaining irrigators' water licences will increase. They said that contrary to what is being argued by industry, the asset value of irrigators is increasing.¹⁴²

Some groups argued that negative impacts are exaggerated and positive impacts are not recognised

2.42 Understanding the connection between buybacks and socio-economic changes in communities impacted by buybacks is contentious and difficult.¹⁴³ Some stakeholders explained the negative impacts of buybacks are often emphasised, while the positive impacts are not commonly recognised.¹⁴⁴

2.43 Professor Sarah Wheeler said that since the Basin Plan was released, there has been a strong belief that water recovery is associated with rural economic

¹³⁸ [Submission 106](#), Mr Dan Schulz, p 4.

¹³⁹ Dan Schulz, PhD Researcher, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 14.

¹⁴⁰ Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 11-12.

¹⁴¹ Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 5 February 2026, p 1.

¹⁴² [Submission 99](#), Quambone Pastoral Co. Pty Ltd, p 2.

¹⁴³ [Submission 62](#), p 2.

¹⁴⁴ [Submission 19](#), pp 1-2; [Submission 66](#), p 2.

decline. She said her studies have shown that published media discussing water recovery has often been overwhelmingly negative.

They always talk about the negative aspects of water recovery, never talking about the positive aspects. So this has entrenched a view that water recovery has harmed rural communities.¹⁴⁵

- 2.44 Dan Schulz talked about a bias towards consumptive water users in the NSW Government's risk assessment of water purchases. He argued that incorporating the costs of environmental decline, particularly from fish kills, into risk assessment provides a more inclusive picture of the impact of water reforms.¹⁴⁶

Other factors are contributing to social and economic changes in regional NSW

- 2.45 Some people made the point that there are many drivers of economic and social change in regional communities and the impacts of buybacks are overstated.¹⁴⁷

- 2.46 Healthy Rivers Lower Murray submitted that buybacks have been wrongly blamed for adversity which they argue is due to other factors including remoteness, population size, economic diversity and high dependence on agriculture. They said that:

Buy-backs from willing sellers have been shown repeatedly to be the fairest, most efficient and effective way to recover water, compared to expensive infrastructure upgrades and on-farm savings.¹⁴⁸

- 2.47 Gary Hall, President, Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, said the irrigation sector in north-west NSW has modernised which has reduced employment opportunities and this push to modernise is confused with or blamed on water recovery processes.¹⁴⁹ Richard Unsworth, Community Member, said that 'Decline of rural towns is happening even where irrigation isn't the main industry'.¹⁵⁰
- 2.48 Louise Gall, Executive Officer, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, also noted technological changes have caused some of those changes and reduced productive output. She said unskilled workers are struggling because they are not able to do the jobs that are now available.¹⁵¹
- 2.49 Professor Sarah Wheeler identified a number of trends in rural communities which have been continuing for decades and suggests the impact of buybacks is overstated. Essentially her argument is:

¹⁴⁵ Professor Sarah Wheeler, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 10.

¹⁴⁶ [Submission 106](#), p 3.

¹⁴⁷ [Submission 62](#), p 3; [Submission 98](#), p 2; Jonathon Howard, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 3-4; Richard Unsworth, Community Member, [Transcript of evidence](#), 12 August 2025, p 6; Professor Long Nghiem, Director, Centre for Technology in Water and Wastewater, University of Technology Sydney, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 11.

¹⁴⁸ [Submissions 19](#), pp 1-2

¹⁴⁹ Gary Hall, President, Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 9.

¹⁵⁰ Richard Unsworth, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 24 October 2025, p 1.

¹⁵¹ Louise Gall, Executive Officer, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 35.

Yes, I completely understand that rural communities are doing it tough, and I understand they believe it's related to water recovery. But I disagree on the causality there. It's not to say that buyback has not impacted rural communities; it has. But our argument is that it's been overstated as an influence.¹⁵²

- 2.50 The Nature Conservation Council of NSW argued that based on findings from a report by Sarah Wheeler and others,¹⁵³ water recovery is not a significant driver of socio-economic decline. They argued that water recovery has had a measurable but modest socio-economic impact compared to broader climatic and economic drivers.¹⁵⁴
- 2.51 Other reasons the negative impact of buybacks might be overstated raised by stakeholders are:
- the irrigation industry is not a big employer in some areas, compared to areas such as Moree and Narrabri¹⁵⁵
 - there is significant Government support provided to the irrigation industry that has continued to grow in value over the course of the Basin Plan¹⁵⁶
 - higher water prices are being driven by drought and increasing demand from water intensive crops.¹⁵⁷

Some irrigator groups supported buybacks over other water recovery methods such as rules-based changes

- 2.52 Some organisations expressed support for buybacks over other forms of water recovery, such as rules-based changes.¹⁵⁸ The Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association said that as sellers are compensated, rules-based changes are inequitable and are seen as compulsory acquisition. They argued if the Government wants more environmental water, then they must purchase it from the market.¹⁵⁹
- 2.53 Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia, said if water acquisition has to occur, buybacks are better than rules-based changes. His preference is for acquisition to occur with investment in water efficiencies.¹⁶⁰ While the NSW Irrigators' Council said further water recovery is not necessary, if government decide to pursue it, voluntary purchases from the market is the only equitable method of water recovery.¹⁶¹

¹⁵² Professor Sarah Wheeler, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 10-11.

¹⁵³ Wheeler, S., Xu, Y., Zuo, A., Haensch, J., & Seidl, C. [Identifying the water related economic values of the Murray-Darling Basin and rating the quality of water economic studies](#), Final Report for the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, 2003.

¹⁵⁴ [Submission 98](#), p 6.

¹⁵⁵ Gary Mooring, Vice President, Louth Chamber of Commerce, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 10.

¹⁵⁶ Ed Fessey, Floodplain Grazier and Community Member, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 15.

¹⁵⁷ [Submission 62](#), p 2.

¹⁵⁸ [Submission 63](#), Barwon-Darling Water, p 2.

¹⁵⁹ [Submission 23](#), Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association (GVIA), p 7.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 15.

¹⁶¹ [Submission 83](#), p 5.

Leasing environmental water could help reduce the impact of water recovery programs

Summary: Some stakeholders suggested that leasing water licenses to the government should be considered as an alternative strategy to buybacks. The Committee was advised that while leasing is not currently being used, it could be a viable alternative and is technically possible. There is some support for this approach with stakeholders.

Recommendation 5

That the NSW Government advocate for water leases in place of buybacks as a method of recovering water towards its targets under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

- 2.54 Leasing water could provide a viable alternative to permanent water recovery. Leases are a type of temporary water trade and could involve a contract to sell water to the Australian Government for a limited period of time.¹⁶²
- 2.55 The Committee was informed that water leasing may have more support among irrigators and irrigation dependent communities.¹⁶³ John Medcalf, Board Member, Country Mayors Association, and Mayor, Lachlan Shire Council, said that leasing would be better than buybacks as it still allows money to be flowing in but without affecting the business as much.¹⁶⁴ Professor Sarah Wheeler, said irrigators have historically adopted temporary trade more than permanent trade.¹⁶⁵
- 2.56 Water leasing provides different benefits than buybacks. The Centre for Technology in Water & Wastewater, University of Technology Sydney, noted that leases and buybacks are 'fundamentally different in purpose and consequence'. They said leases achieve a similar environmental outcome as buybacks but only for a defined period as the water asset can return to the irrigator and productive use at the end of the lease term. They raised other advantages including:
- allows time to adapt and trial new technologies
 - lease income provides relief during dry years without forcing an exit from irrigation.¹⁶⁶
- 2.57 Professor Sarah Wheeler also discussed the potential wide ranging benefits of leasing which were identified by her studies involving scenario analysis. These benefits include distributing transition costs, increased flexibility, enhanced

¹⁶² Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 5 February 2026, p 1.

¹⁶³ Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 5 February 2026, p 1.

¹⁶⁴ John Medcalf, Board Member, Country Mayors Association, and Mayor, Lachlan Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 18.

¹⁶⁵ Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 5 February 2026, p 1.

¹⁶⁶ Centre for Technology in Water and Wastewater University of Technology Sydney, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 22 December 2025, p 1.

environmental flows, greater participation from irrigators, and potentially improved cost efficiency.¹⁶⁷

2.58 However, the Committee was informed there are disadvantages to leasing water. It would be administratively complex and would require ongoing program management and transaction costs.¹⁶⁸

2.59 It may also be subject to more price volatility as irrigators could be unwilling to lease during dry times and would be difficult to monitor compliance to ensure it delivers ecological outcomes.¹⁶⁹ Johanna Barnard, Manager, Sumar Produce, does not think leasing is the answer as it is going to cost significant taxpayer money and will not resolve the issue of having water in times of drought.¹⁷⁰

Water leasing is not currently used but is possible

2.60 The current regulatory framework could accommodate leasing. Andrew George, Chief Executive Officer, WaterNSW, compared temporary trades in the water market to leasing. He said there are no restrictions on it and if a mechanism is available it could be something to explore.¹⁷¹

2.61 Mitchell Isaacs explained that the NSW regulatory framework allows temporary and term transfers of water licences and is adaptable to changing climate dynamics.¹⁷²

2.62 The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water said that leasing could provide shorter term benefits. However they noted that their preference is permanent recovery through buybacks and that leasing would require ongoing reliance on market availability.¹⁷³

2.63 The CEWH said that water could be leased to them through their statutory powers. Although the CEWH does not currently lease water, they said any water leased to them could contribute to environmental outcomes for the duration of the lease.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁷ Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 5 February 2026, p 1.

¹⁶⁸ Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 5 February 2026, p 1.

¹⁶⁹ Centre for Technology in Water and Wastewater, University of Technology Sydney, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 22 December 2025, pp 1-2.

¹⁷⁰ Johanna Barnard, Manager, Sumar Produce, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 19

¹⁷¹ Andrew George, Chief Executive Officer, WaterNSW, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 8.

¹⁷² Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 8.

¹⁷³ Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to written questions](#), 25 February 2025, p 2.

¹⁷⁴ Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 9 January 2026, p 2.

Chapter Three – The impacts of changes to water rules

Social, economic and environmental impacts

Summary: Changes to water rules have social, economic and environmental impacts. Water rules have played an important role in helping manage environmental outcomes in the Murray-Darling Basin. However, they have also impacted the reliability and availability of water at key times for industry. This has an impact on farmers and communities, and should be considered when assessing rule changes as an alternative to buybacks.

Recommendation 6

That the NSW Government reconsider using changes to water rules to recover water for the environment under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, and reevaluate existing rules such as the Namoi valley 90/10 supplementary sharing rule.

Changes to water rules impact water allocations and irrigation-dependent communities

- 3.1 A number of inquiry participants believed changes to water rules by the NSW Government have impacted the reliability of water allocations.¹⁷⁵ Stakeholders were concerned that the Australian and NSW governments are advocating further changes to water rules as a form of water recovery for the 450 GL/y.¹⁷⁶
- 3.2 While the Committee understands that water rules are an important part of managing water in the Murray-Darling Basin,¹⁷⁷ it agrees with stakeholders that rule changes can also have negative socio-economic impacts.¹⁷⁸ The Committee is of the view that the NSW Government should not use changes to water rules as an alternative to buybacks to recover water towards the 450 GL/y of additional environmental water. The NSW Government should also ensure that the impacts and benefits of rule changes are being tracked and counted towards Basin Plan targets where appropriate.

¹⁷⁵ [Submission 23](#), Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association (GVIA), p 6; [Submission 45](#), Namoi Water, pp 9-11; [Submission 63](#), Barwon-Darling Water, p 4; [Submission 65](#), Murray Regional Strategy Group, p 12; [Submission 83](#), NSW Irrigators' Council, pp 17-18; [Submission 89](#), Inverell Shire Council, p 2; [Submission 95](#), Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, pp 3-4.

¹⁷⁶ [Submission 63](#), p 4; [Submission 83](#), pp 4, 17-18; [Submission 95](#), p 3.

¹⁷⁷ [Submission 31](#), NSW Government, p 15.

¹⁷⁸ [Submission 23](#), p 6; [Submission 82](#), NSW Farmers, p 8; Tony Thompson, Irrigator, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 21; Bobbie Pannowitz, President, Leeton Business Chamber, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 33; Namoi Water, [Answers to questions on notice](#), 21 October 2025, p 1.

- 3.3 Both the NSW Government and the Australian Government confirmed that, to date, no water has been recovered towards the 450 GL/y of additional environmental water through rule changes.¹⁷⁹

Water rules and Water Sharing Plans

Water rules set conditions on when water can be accessed, how much can be accessed and which licenses can access water. A Water Sharing Plan is a policy document created that sets out water rules. The NSW Government is required to create WSPs under the *Water Management Act 2000*.¹⁸⁰ The first water sharing plan was released in 2003.¹⁸¹

Under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, water rules help ensure that states do not extract water above the sustainable diversion limit. Under the Water Act 2023, changes to water rules may also be used to recover water for the environment.¹⁸²

Table 3: Water rules help maintain the sustainable diversion limit. Under certain conditions, changes to water rules may be used to recover water for the 450 GL/y for the environment.

2,075 GL/y Sustainable Diversion Limit (Bridging the gap target)	70 GL/y northern Basin	605 GL/y SDLAM	450 GL/y – Enhanced Environmental Outcomes
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Impacts on water allocations

- 3.4 Stakeholders submitted examples of rules changes that have impacted water users' access to water.¹⁸³ Examples included supplementary sharing rules in the Namoi Valley (2004)¹⁸⁴ and the Barwon-Darling 'resumption of flows' rule (2020).¹⁸⁵
- 3.5 Another example is 'individual daily extraction limits' (IDECs).¹⁸⁶ IDECs limit how much water can be taken out of a river system in one day. NSW Irrigators' Council explained that theoretically these do not change water allocations. However, many irrigators are unable to access their full allocation because the IDEC is below what they can pump.¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁹ NSW Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 13 January 2026, p 1; Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to written questions](#), 25 February 2026, p 1.

¹⁸⁰ [Submission 31](#), p 13.

¹⁸¹ [Submission 31](#), p 15.

¹⁸² Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to written questions](#), 25 February 2026, p 1.

¹⁸³ [Submission 33](#), Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited, p 5; [Submission 45](#), pp 9-10; [Submission 83](#), pp 18-23; Tony Thompson, Irrigator, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, pp 18, 21.

¹⁸⁴ [Submission 45](#), pp 9-10, 20; [Submission 83](#), pp 18-19.

¹⁸⁵ [Submission 83](#), p 19.

¹⁸⁶ [Submission 83](#), p 19; Tony Thompson, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 18.

¹⁸⁷ [Submission 83](#), p 19.

- 3.6 Tony Thompson, an irrigator based in Bourke and Brewarrina, told us the IDECs have impacted how quickly water could be extracted. It may now take him 10 to 14 days to pump an amount of water that used to be pumped in a week.¹⁸⁸
- 3.7 Some stakeholders explained that while individual rule changes might seem to have a small impact. However, the number of rule changes is collectively reducing reliability and/or access windows.¹⁸⁹
- 3.8 Murray Regional Strategy Group told us that Murray Valley General Security reliability has reduced from 83 per cent to 48 per cent through rules based changes.¹⁹⁰ Gwydir Valley Irrigators told us rule changes are causing further reliability issues for that General Security licenses in the Gwydir Valley. These are already only 36 per cent reliable.¹⁹¹
- 3.9 NSW Farmers told us that the NSW Government is introducing new Water Sharing Plans that might further impact access windows for some license holders.¹⁹² They explained estimates for the Namoi and Peel Unregulated Rivers Water Sources Water Sharing Plan (WSP) showed some license holders will be restricted from accessing water for 93 per cent of the year on average.

Impacts on farming and regional communities

- 3.10 As well as impacting water allocations, stakeholders informed the Committee that these changes have had economic impacts on farming and industry.¹⁹³
- 3.11 Murray Regional Strategy Group noted that the number of recent rule changes have made it difficult for farmers to plan. As a result, they are either reducing food production or livestock numbers or being forced to buy water through the market.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, NSW Farmers informed the Committee that issues with reliability has impacted how farmers plan and manage their water.¹⁹⁵
- 3.12 Gwydir Valley Irrigators explained that entitlement holders are becoming 'more risk averse' due to the reduced reliability of licenses. This is impacting job security for staff and 'reducing the ability of regional communities to survive'.¹⁹⁶
- 3.13 Similar evidence was received from Namoi Water, an industry group representing irrigators in the northern Basin. They argued that, whether through buybacks or rules based changes, reduced water 'immediately translates into impacts on a farmers planting decisions'. They explained this has carryover impacts for

¹⁸⁸ Tony Thompson, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, pp 18-19.

¹⁸⁹ [Submission 82](#), p 8; [Submission 83](#), p 18; Tony Thompson, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, pp 18-19, 21; Bobbie Pannowitz, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 33.

¹⁹⁰ [Submission 65](#), p 12.

¹⁹¹ [Submission 23](#), p 6.

¹⁹² NSW Farmers, [Answers to questions on notice](#), 16 December 2025, p 1.

¹⁹³ [Submission 65](#), p 13; [Submission 82](#), NSW Farmers, p 9; [Submission 23](#), p 6; Bobbie Pannowitz, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 33.

¹⁹⁴ [Submission 65](#), p 13.

¹⁹⁵ [Submission 82](#), p 9.

¹⁹⁶ [Submission 23](#), p 6.

employees and communities, with 'fewer shifts worked and therefore less local spend'.¹⁹⁷

- 3.14 Bobby Pannowitz, President of the Leeton Business Chamber, described rule changes in 'program after program' as part of a 'death by a thousand cuts' impacting regional communities.¹⁹⁸ She told the Committee that a third of rice might go, resulting in 'less jobs and less money spent in our stores in town'.¹⁹⁹
- 3.15 Agriculture or smaller farmers may be particularly impacted by changes to water rules.²⁰⁰ Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council Inc argued that general security and supplementary licenses are the most likely to be impacted by a rule change. This is because their access is lower priority than other forms of water licenses. This is an issue, because agricultural licenses tend to fall into this category.²⁰¹

The Namoi Valley supplementary sharing rule should be re-evaluated

- 3.16 The Committee received evidence from the northern Basin that a specific rule, the Namoi Valley supplementary sharing rule or '90:10 rule', should be re-evaluated.
- 3.17 The 90:10 rule requires that, between July and October, 90 per cent of 'supplementary flows' must be left in the Namoi River for the environment.²⁰² Up to ten percent of the supplementary water can be extracted by users with a license to pump supplementary water.²⁰³ 'Supplementary' water refers to uncontrolled flows of water in regulated systems (rivers with weirs). For example, if there is a significant amount of rain the water might flow over a dam or weir, and cannot be captured.²⁰⁴
- 3.18 The Committee were informed that the rule was originally introduced in 2004 to support fish breeding in the river during these months.²⁰⁵ It was suspended in 2015 for a trial, before being reintroduced in 2019.²⁰⁶
- 3.19 Namoi Water explained that the rule has a significant impact on users in the Namoi Valley. Namoi Water submitted that it places 'severe constraints' on summer cropping, particularly in Wee Waa.²⁰⁷ Similarly, NSW Irrigators' Council

¹⁹⁷ Namoi Water, [Answers to questions on notice](#), 21 October 2025, p 1.

¹⁹⁸ Bobbie Pannowitz, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 33.

¹⁹⁹ Bobbie Pannowitz, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 33.

²⁰⁰ [Submission 26](#), Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council Inc, p 9; [Submission 97](#), Leeton Shire Council, p 3.

²⁰¹ [Submission 26](#), p 9.

²⁰² [Submission 83](#), pp 18-19.

²⁰³ See, also: [Water Sharing Plan for the Upper Namoi and Lower Namoi Regulated River Water Sources 2016](#)

²⁰⁴ NSW Department of Climate Change, the Environment, Energy and Water, [Supplementary water](#), accessed 6 March 2026.

²⁰⁵ [Submission 45](#), p 10, [Submission 83](#), pp 18-19.

²⁰⁶ Mick Coffey, Executive Officer, Namoi Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 22.

²⁰⁷ [Submission 45](#), pp 10, 20.

explained that the months where water access is restricted are the months that are important to croppers.²⁰⁸

- 3.20 Mick Coffey, Executive Officer of Namoi Water, told us the rule had been 'really, really damaging... in the Namoi'.²⁰⁹ He explained that in some situations it might be the only opportunity to access water. This impacts planting decisions.²¹⁰
- 3.21 Namoi Water explained that between 2016-17, a period when the 90:10 rule was removed, irrigators used 75GL of water. They estimated this generated \$200 million in economic activity and supported 100 or more jobs in the region.²¹¹
- 3.22 Namoi Water and the NSW Irrigators' Council argued that the environmental benefits of this rule are not clear.²¹² Namoi Water informed the Committee NSW Fisheries acknowledged that the rule had not delivered tangible benefits or outcomes.²¹³ They also argued that modelling had consistently shown the rule only resulted in small differences in flows.²¹⁴

Rule changes are not compensated

- 3.23 Stakeholders also informed the Committee that they are not being compensated for the loss of water availability tied to a rule change.²¹⁵ Some stakeholders contrasted this to buybacks, where a license holder chooses to sell their right to access water and is paid for it.²¹⁶
- 3.24 NSW Irrigators' Council argued that it is unfair that sellers are compensated for buybacks, but with rule changes 'all license holders take a cut in water access involuntarily and without compensation'.²¹⁷
- 3.25 Similarly, Namoi Water explained that they are 'furious' irrigators are being treated differently depending on how water is recovered. They explained that the results of buybacks and rule changes are the same: 'farmers lose access to water, and communities suffer the consequences'.²¹⁸
- 3.26 Inquiry participants argued that the NSW Government's failure to pay compensation may be out of line with the National Water Initiative (an intergovernmental agreement on water).²¹⁹ Clause 49 of this agreement states that rule changes introduced by a Basin state that result in more than a three per cent change in reliability are supposed to be compensated. Clause 50 requires a

²⁰⁸ [Submission 83](#), p 19.

²⁰⁹ Mick Coffey, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 28.

²¹⁰ Mick Coffey, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 27.

²¹¹ Namoi Water, [Answers to questions on notice](#), 21 October 2025, p 2.

²¹² [Submission 45](#), p 10; [Submission 83](#), p 19; Namoi Water, [Answers to questions on notice](#), 21 October 2025, p 2.

²¹³ [Submission 45](#), p 10.

²¹⁴ Namoi Water, [Answers to questions on notice](#), 21 October 2025, p 2.

²¹⁵ [Submission 45](#), p 9; [Submission 63](#), pp 2, 3-4; [Submission 83](#), p 4.

²¹⁶ [Submission 23](#), p 7; [Submission 45](#), pp 9, 15; [Submission 63](#), pp 2, 3-4; [Submission 83](#), p 17.

²¹⁷ [Submission 83](#), p 17.

²¹⁸ [Submission 45](#), p 15.

²¹⁹ [Submission 60](#), Murrumbidgee Irrigation, p 23; [Submission 63](#), p 4; [Submission 80](#), Macquarie River Food and Fibre, p 2; [Submission 83](#), p 25.

Basin state to compensate users for any reduction in reliability tied to changes of policy, such as new environmental objectives.²²⁰

- 3.27 Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association believed the NSW Government was relying on the three per cent clause to avoid compensation.²²¹ Other irrigation industry stakeholders suggested that the rule changes now being introduced are 'new environmental objectives' and should be fully compensated. This is discussed further below.²²²

Environmental benefits

- 3.28 While a number of stakeholders were concerned about the social and economic impacts of rule changes, the Committee were also advised that planned environmental water and changes to water rules have helped protect the environment in some regions.²²³
- 3.29 Some stakeholders in western NSW in particular explained that the rule changes and/or planned environmental water help prevent fish deaths and algae blooms.²²⁴
- 3.30 For example, Tom Kennedy, Mayor of Broken Hill City Council, highlighted the importance of 'first-flush' rules.²²⁵ He explained this rule did more for the Darling River in their region 'than any buyback'.²²⁶
- 3.31 First flush rules (also called resumption of flow rules) prevent water users from extracting the flow of water running through the system after a dry period. Water users cannot immediately start extracting water when it starts raining and the river starts flowing again.²²⁷
- 3.32 Councillor Kennedy explained that even small flows of water can help keep the banks wet. This 'ensures that fish remain in waterholes' and 'stops the algae blooms from growing'.²²⁸ He explained that it is important to ensure these small flushes keep moving through the system rather than being pumped out by users further up the river.²²⁹
- 3.33 Dan Schulz, a PhD researcher argued that rule changes that improve connectivity and environmental water allocations are 'complementary and essential' to environmental management of the Darling River/Baaka. He explained that

²²⁰ [Submission 83](#), p 25.

²²¹ [Submission 23](#), p 8.

²²² [Submission 83](#), pp 4, 26; [Submission 63](#), pp 4-5.

²²³ [Submission 66](#), Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, p 2; Tom Kennedy, Mayor, Broken Hill City Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, pp 2-3.

²²⁴ [Submission 66](#), p 2; Tom Kennedy, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, pp 2-3.

²²⁵ Tom Kennedy, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, pp 2-3.

²²⁶ Tom Kennedy, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 6.

²²⁷ [Submission 31](#), p 14;

²²⁸ Tom Kennedy, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, pp 3, 6.

²²⁹ Tom Kennedy, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 3.

environmental water allocations are important to mitigate risk, manage water quality and to support native fish.²³⁰

3.34 The Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, an organisation that represents the interests of pastoral enterprises in western NSW, explained that planned environmental water has helped maintain water quality and mitigated fish kills in the lower Darling River. They argued that baseline flows and planned environmental water should be used to support bird breeding and fish spawning, as well as mitigating disasters.²³¹

3.35 The NSW Government informed the Committee that they have recently implemented a range of reforms designed to improve connectivity and protect low flows. As well as the resumption of flows rule, they raised 'A class' license thresholds for the Barwon-Darling. This increases the amount of water that needs to be in the water way before the first class of license holders are permitted to start extracting the water.²³²

Accounting for rule changes and planned environmental water

Summary: It is important to track the potential and actual impacts of rule changes on water users and the environment. This information can help ensure the NSW Government is making informed decisions on water policy, and will increase the transparency of how policy changes have impacted water users and regional communities.

The impacts of changes to water rules should be tracked

Finding 4

Changes to water rules by the NSW Government have recovered water for the environment that is outside of current calculations under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Finding 5

There is no clear understanding of how much water that is targeted to be recovered under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan has been recovered through these changes to water rules.

Recommendation 7

That the NSW government work with the Federal government to align environmental water requirements so water recovered under NSW polices are attributed towards Federal water recovery targets.

3.36 Where rule changes are being introduced, the NSW Government should be modelling and tracking their impacts. The Committee reiterates the importance of ensuring that the Murray-Darling Basin Review 2026 includes complete information on how much water has been recovered, including via changes to

²³⁰ [Submission 106](#), Dan Schulz, p 5.

²³¹ [Submission 66](#), p 2.

²³² [Submission 31](#), p 14.

water rules. Without this tracking, it may be hard to determine whether rule changes are working, or if further rule changes are necessary.

- 3.37 Stakeholders suggested to the Committee that the NSW Government is not tracking the impacts and benefits of the rule changes it is introducing.²³³ As a result it is not clear how much water has been recovered for the environment through changes to water rules.²³⁴ The total impact of cumulative changes on water users or industry is unclear.²³⁵
- 3.38 Michael Drum, Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre told the Committee that the NSW Government has not been able to 'accurately assess the cumulative impact of policy change volumetrically'.²³⁶ Similarly, NSW Irrigators Council submitted there has been no assessment of the cumulative impacts of rule changes on water users or the environment.²³⁷
- 3.39 NSW Farmers submitted that changes to WSPs tend to express goals in terms of expected environmental outcomes. They explained there is rarely 'any finite water volume assigned to changes to WSPs'. This contrasts to buybacks and SDLAM projects, where there is an 'intense focus on a set ML [megalitre] or GL value'.²³⁸
- 3.40 NSW Farmers explained that many farmers, rural communities and other stakeholders:
- have genuine concern that the re-balancing of the existing use of water against potential environmental need is advancing ahead without due consideration for the practical impacts to agricultural water users and a true understanding of the modelled environmental benefits that may theoretically eventuate.²³⁹
- 3.41 Some inquiry participants were concerned that water has been recovered beyond what has been credited under the Basin Plan.²⁴⁰ Bourke Shire Council provided the example of one proposed rule change that might reduce water allocations by 43ML/day and deliver this water to the Darling River (see below). They suggested these changes should be included in overall recovery calculations.²⁴¹
- 3.42 The lack of tracking may impact compensation for impacted users. NSW Irrigators' Council explained that there is 'no complete record of rules changes and their cumulative impacts'. However, 'Governments are obliged to compensate for rules-based changes in certain circumstances'.²⁴²

²³³ Michael Drum, Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 38;

²³⁴ [Submission 83](#), p 18; NSW Farmers, [Answers to questions on notice](#), 16 December 2025, p 1.

²³⁵ [Submission 82](#), p 8; [Submission 83](#), p 18; Michael Drum, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 38-39.

²³⁶ Michael Drum, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 38.

²³⁷ [Submission 83](#), p 18.

²³⁸ NSW Farmers, 16 December 2025, [Answers to questions on notice](#), p 1.

²³⁹ NSW Farmers, 16 December 2025, [Answers to questions on notice](#), p 2.

²⁴⁰ [Submission 63](#), p 4; Bourke Shire Council, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 9 January 2026, p 2.

²⁴¹ Bourke Shire Council, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 9 January 2026, pp 1-2.

²⁴² [Submission 83](#), p 26.

- 3.43 NSW Farmers explained that the 'erosion of rights and entitlement reliability over the years has proven difficult for stakeholders to quantify'. This is partly because the agencies responsible have not been monitoring, reporting or evaluating these changes.²⁴³
- 3.44 Some stakeholders wanted the impacts on allocation reliability to be modelled and made publicly available. They asked for a public register for better transparency of the total and cumulative impacts of rule changes.²⁴⁴

Case study: Rule change in the Lower Bogan River Source

Bourke Shire Council informed the Committee about a proposed change that might be outside Basin Plan water recovery calculations. The rule change proposes to raise the limit on extraction from 5 ML/day to 48 ML/day at the gauge at Gongolgon in northern NSW.²⁴⁵

The stated purpose of the rule is to help protect water that supports threatened and endangered species including Murray Cod, Silver Perch, Olive Perchlet, Eel-Tailed Catfish and others.²⁴⁶

If introduced, water users will only be able to extract water when the gauge shows 48 ML. Bourke Shire Council explained that if the rule change is introduced it will provide additional water for the Darling River. However, the Council suggested to the Committee that the additional 43 ML/day may not count either to the 'Bridging the Gap' target or the 'Restoring Our River' water recovery target.²⁴⁷

Rule changes might be outside Basin Plan goals

- 3.45 The NSW Government should also be prioritising initiatives that are required under the Basin Plan. Some irrigation-industry stakeholders were concerned that the rule changes being considered are outside Basin Plan targets or requirements.²⁴⁸ Some stakeholders noted these changes might not contribute to 2,075GL/y sustainable diversion limit and/or the 450GL/y of additional environmental water.²⁴⁹
- 3.46 NSW Irrigators' Council and Barwon Darling Water were concerned that many rule changes now being considered by the NSW Government are for 'new environmental objectives.' They noted these may be outside the sustainable diversion limit and the 450 GL/y of additional environmental water. They argued

²⁴³ NSW Farmers, 16 December 2025, [Answers to questions on notice](#), p 1.

²⁴⁴ [Submission 45](#), p 15; [Submission 63](#), p 6; [Submission 83](#), p 5.

²⁴⁵ Bourke Shire Council, 9 January 2026, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), pp 1-2.

²⁴⁶ NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Proposed access rule change in Lower Bogan River Water Source](#), August 2025, p 2.

²⁴⁷ Bourke Shire Council, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 9 January 2026, pp 1-2.

²⁴⁸ [Submission 45](#), p 14; [Submission 63](#), p 5; [Submission 83](#), p 26.

²⁴⁹ [Submission 63](#), p 4; [Submission 83](#), pp 4, 26.

that water recovered through these changes does not count towards Basin Plan targets.²⁵⁰

- 3.47 These stakeholders explained this could worsen the socio-economic impacts of implementing the Basin Plan, and make 'a bad situation worse'.²⁵¹
- 3.48 This may have implications for compensation, because the National Water Initiative requires compensation for the erosion of water reliability tied to policy change including 'new environmental objectives'.²⁵²

Changes to harvestable rights

Summary: Harvestable rights refers to the rights of certain landholders to capture, store and use some of the rainwater that falls on their property. Harvestable rights volumes were recently reduced from 30 per cent to 10 per cent. The Committee received mixed evidence from stakeholders on the impact of these changes.

- 3.49 Changes to water rules have impacted access for irrigators outside NSW's Basin communities.
- 3.50 The Committee was informed that the NSW Government has also recently changed water access for landholders in coastal valleys through changes to harvestable rights. In 2022, the rainfall runoff that could be collected by landholders was reduced from thirty per cent back to ten per cent. Ten per cent is the amount that was permitted prior to October 2021.²⁵³
- 3.51 Harvestable rights refers to the rights of certain landholders to capture, store and use a specified volume of rainwater that falls on their property. This can be done without a license. There are limitations depending on the catchment, and these are outlined in harvestable rights orders.²⁵⁴
- 3.52 Harvestable rights are particularly important for certain agricultural industries in certain areas. They are used by farmers growing fruit on NSW's coast.²⁵⁵
- 3.53 Richmond and Wilsons Combined Water Users Association (RWCUA) explained that for water users who rely on harvestable rights, the change to ten per cent could have a big impact.²⁵⁶ They noted that these rights are particularly important for growers in areas without access to other irrigation options, like floodplain harvesting. They told the Committee that most water users have

²⁵⁰ [Submission 83](#), pp 4, 26; [Submission 63](#), pp 4-5.

²⁵¹ [Submission 83](#), p 4; [Submission 63](#), pp 4-5.

²⁵² [Submission 83](#), pp 4, 26; [Submission 63](#), pp 4-5.

²⁵³ [Submission 73](#), Richmond and Wilsons Combined Water Users Association, p 2; [Submission 83](#), p 23; Paul Shoker, Farmer, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, p 5; Chris Magner, Chairman, Richmond and Wilsons Combined Water Users Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, pp 10-11.

²⁵⁴ DCCEEW Water, [Harvestable rights](#), accessed 5 March 2026.

²⁵⁵ Paul Shoker, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, p 5.

²⁵⁶ Chris Magner, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, p 11.

access to groundwater sources, a creek or dam. However, those who need the water are 'affected dramatically'.²⁵⁷

- 3.54 Paul Shoker, a farmer in Coffs Harbour, told us that these restrictions along with others may be causing more of the fruit industry to go to Queensland.²⁵⁸
- 3.55 The NSW Government has stated harvestable rights were changed back to ten per cent as a temporary measure in order to determine a sustainable level of take.²⁵⁹ However, the Committee was advised that the NSW Government may be overestimating how widely harvestable rights are used, or how big an impact a 30 per cent allowance would have.²⁶⁰
- 3.56 RWCWUA were concerned that the new sustainable yield percentage would be based on an assumption that all landholders would use the full extent of their available harvestable rights. However, they submitted only five per cent of eligible landholders use their right to harvest water.²⁶¹ Similarly, NSW Irrigators' Council explained that water used in coastal areas is far below allocated volumes.²⁶²
- 3.57 Rachel McKenzie, CEO of Berries Australia told the Committee that whatever limit is set, it is important that it is based on science.²⁶³
- 3.58 There might also need to be more flexibility in how limits to harvestable rights are set.²⁶⁴ Berries Australia explained there is variability in the environment across the region. As a result, it could be necessary to set limits on a catchment-by-catchment basis.²⁶⁵ RWCWUA told us they understood the NSW Government might be assessing the sustainable yield of each valley, but that progress seemed to have stalled.²⁶⁶
- 3.59 Stakeholders told us that whatever limit is set, there is a need for greater certainty and better communication so that water users can make planning decisions.²⁶⁷ The need for improved consultation and communication is discussed further in Chapter 5.

²⁵⁷ Chris Magner, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, p 11.

²⁵⁸ Paul Shoker, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, pp 5, 7.

²⁵⁹ DCCEEW Water, [Frequently asked questions about harvestable rights](#), accessed 5 March 2026.

²⁶⁰ [Submission 73](#), p 2; [Submission 83](#), p 23.

²⁶¹ [Submission 73](#), p 2; Chris Magner, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, p 11.

²⁶² [Submission 83](#), p 23.

²⁶³ Rachel McKenzie, Chief Executive Officer, Berries Australia, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, p 2.

²⁶⁴ Rachel McKenzie, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, pp 3-4.

²⁶⁵ Rachel McKenzie, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, pp 3-4.

²⁶⁶ Chris Magner, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, p 11.

²⁶⁷ Rachel McKenzie, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, pp 2-3; Paul Shoker, [Transcript of evidence](#), 2 December 2025, pp 6, 8.

Chapter Four – Alternative approaches to water recovery

Supply and constraints projects

Summary: Supply and efficiency projects may improve water efficiency and environmental outcomes in the Basin without the need for buybacks. These projects are helping recover water towards the 2,750 GL/y 'bridging the gap' target and the 450GL/y of additional environmental water. The deadline for achieving projects towards the sustainable diversion limit may need to be extended past December 2026.

The SDLAM project deadline should be extended

Recommendation 8

That the NSW Government work with the Australian Government to delay the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) reconciliation beyond 2026 to ensure the positive impacts of SDLAM projects are maximised.

- 4.1 Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) projects are water supply and constraints projects first introduced in 2017 to reduce the need for water recovery. The *Water Act 2023* extended the deadline for these projects from June 2024 to December 2026.²⁶⁸

What is the Sustainable Diversion Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM)?²⁶⁹

The Sustainable Diversion Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) refers to projects that contribute to water recovery by removing constrains or using water more efficiently to benefit the environment.

For example, if there are low-lying barriers that prevent fish moving downstream when there is not much water, removing these can help improve fish movement. Similarly, projects that prevent water from evaporating can help keep more water in the system.

SDLAM accounts for 605GL/y of the total water recovery target.

²⁶⁸ Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Sustainable Diversion Limits](#), last updated 25 February 2026, accessed 4 March 2026.

²⁶⁹ Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Sustainable Diversion Limits](#), last updated 25 February 2026, accessed 23 March 2026.



Location of SDLAM projects. The majority of NSW's projects are in the southern Basin.²⁷⁰

Table 4: The Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism contributes to achieving the Basin Plan's original 2 750 GL target.

2,075 GL/y Sustainable Diversion Limit (Bridging the gap target)	70 GL/y northern Basin	605 GL/y SDLAM	450 GL/y Enhanced Environmental Outcomes
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- 4.2 Inquiry participants explained that these projects can support environmental outcomes without the need to purchase water.²⁷¹
- 4.3 The main concern of stakeholders was that SDLAM projects would not be completed by the December 2026 deadline.²⁷² Some were concerned the shortfall will result in a reduction of water for consumptive use, including via buybacks.²⁷³
- 4.4 The Committee shares stakeholders' view that the NSW Government should work with the Australian Government to delay the SDLAM reconciliation.²⁷⁴ The reconciliation date should ensure that productive SDLAM projects are close to completion, to maximise water savings included in the 605GL/y target.

²⁷⁰ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [Progress of sustainable diversion limit adjustment mechanism measures](#), date last updated 8 December 2025, accessed 23 March 2026.

²⁷¹ See, for example: [Submission 60](#), Murrumbidgee Irrigation, p 3.

²⁷² [Submission 33](#), Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited, pp 4-5; [Submission 60](#), pp 3, 14, 15; [Submission 83](#), NSW Irrigators' Council, p 31; NSW Farmers, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 19 December 2025, p 2; Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 19; Tom Green, Chair, New South Wales Irrigators' Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 27.

²⁷³ [Submission 33](#), pp 1, 9; Michael Murray, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 19.

²⁷⁴ [Submission 60](#), pp 3-4; Tom Green, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 27.

- 4.5 The Committee understands that the 31 December 2026 deadline was introduced by the Water Act 2023.²⁷⁵ However, the Committee is of the view that an amendment that maximises the benefits of these projects would be worthwhile. If the SDLAM reconciliation is not delayed, the NSW Government should work with the Australian Government to ensure that the contributions of the state's SDLAM projects are recognised and that delays in constraints relaxation do not result in further buybacks.

SDLAM projects benefit the environment

- 4.6 Stakeholders informed the Committee that SDLAM projects can help achieve environmental outcomes. In particular, they noted that SDLAM projects:
- can reduce the need for water purchases²⁷⁶
 - can deliver environmental outcomes that would not be achievable via buybacks²⁷⁷
 - are important for the delivery of environmental water.²⁷⁸
- 4.7 Griffith Business Chamber provided the example of the 'Enhanced Environmental Water Delivery' as a project that helps maximise environmental outcomes with less water. This project allows the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder to release held environmental water at the same time as natural flows caused by rainfall. They explained that being strategic about when water is released can deliver the same outcomes with less water.²⁷⁹
- 4.8 Professor Long Nghiem, from the University of Technology Sydney, described SDLAM projects as 'an essential part of the toolbox'.²⁸⁰ He explained that, while they can be expensive at first, they are likely to become more cost effective as the technology develops.²⁸¹

Case study: Tuppall Creek (Mid-Murray Anabanches Project)²⁸²

An example of a SDLAM constraints project in NSW is the Mid-Murray Anabanches project. The goal of this project is to ensure water can move through from the Murray River into the Edward River, and to support native fish movement.

For this project, the NSW Department of Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure is working with private landholders to build clear span bridges

²⁷⁵ NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 13 January 2026, p 4.

²⁷⁶ [Submission 71](#), Amanda Barlow, p 2.

²⁷⁷ [Submission 60](#), p 14; [Submission 67](#), Griffith Business Chamber, p 3.

²⁷⁸ [Submission 60](#), p 16.

²⁷⁹ [Submission 67](#), p 3.

²⁸⁰ Professor Long Nghiem, Director, Centre for Technology in Water and Wastewater, University of Technology Sydney, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 9-10.

²⁸¹ Professor Long Nghiem, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 9-10.

²⁸² Water, [Mid-Murray Anabanches Project](#), last updated 12 January 2026, accessed 23 March 2026.

along the Tuppall creek. A 'clear span bridge' is a bridge that goes completely over a river, rather than having supports that cut off water flow.

The new bridges are higher than the bridges they replace. The higher structures will ensure that landowners can move across their property during environmental water releases. The new bridges also do not obstruct the movement of water, helping support fish passage and the flow of lower volumes of water.

SDLAM projects are not on track to be completed

- 4.9 A number of stakeholders presented evidence that NSW's SDLAM projects and the SDLAM projects of other Basin states are not on track to be completed by the deadline of 31 December 2026.²⁸³ The Committee heard that failure to meet this deadline may result in the use of other water recovery methods to achieve the Sustainable Diversion Limit.²⁸⁴
- 4.10 NSW Farmers cited the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's most recent assessment, the December 2025 Assurance Report, as evidence of SDLAM projects being behind schedule.²⁸⁵ The report stated that 'almost half' of the SDLAM measures were unlikely to be complete by 31 December 2026. As of December 2025, there was a projected shortfall of between 255GL/y and 355GL/y from SDLAM projects across the Basin.²⁸⁶
- 4.11 Similarly, NSW Irrigators' Council informed us that Murray-Darling Basin Authority reports have 'consistently shown' a shortfall of close to 300GL/y due to SDLAM project delays.²⁸⁷
- 4.12 Some stakeholders were particularly concerned about the delays in constraints relaxation projects.²⁸⁸ Constraints relaxation projects are projects that remove barriers to delivering environmental water. This could be physical barriers like bridges, or policies or rules that restrict water use.²⁸⁹ Stakeholders explained the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's own 'Constraints Roadmap' projects a ten-year timeframe to 2036. However, the SDLAM deadline has not been changed to align with this ten-year plan.²⁹⁰

²⁸³ [Submission 33](#), pp 4-5; [Submission 60](#), p 15; [Submission 83](#), NSW Irrigators' Council, pp 15, 31; NSW Farmers, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 19 December 2025, p 2; Michael Murray, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 19.

²⁸⁴ Michael Murray, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 19.

²⁸⁵ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism: 2025 Assurance Report](#), December 2025, cited in NSW Farmers, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 19 December 2025, p 2.

²⁸⁶ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism: 2025 Assurance Report](#), December 2025, p 3.

²⁸⁷ [Submission 83](#), p 15.

²⁸⁸ [Submission 33](#), p 4; [Submission 60](#), Murrumbidgee Irrigation, pp 4, 16, 17. Murray Darling Basin Authority, [Constraints Relaxation Implementation Roadmap: A guide for governments to progress constraints relaxation projects](#), December 2024, p 6.

²⁸⁹ Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Sustainable Diversion Limits](#), accessed 23 March 2026.

²⁹⁰ [Submission 33](#), p 4; [Submission 60](#), pp 4, 17.

- 4.13 The Committee was informed that any shortfall towards the SDLAM may impact NSW communities, even if NSW's projects are completed by December 2026. Murrumbidgee Irrigation explained that Basin states agreed how the total shortfall would be shared across states in 2017.²⁹¹ NSW's share is 47.4 per cent, regardless of how much water the state has recovered through completed SDLAM projects.
- 4.14 It is not clear how the Australian Government might meet the Sustainable Diversion Limit if there is a shortfall. However, some stakeholders are concerned that the shortfall might be recovered via further buybacks.²⁹²
- 4.15 The Australian Government explained that the response to any SDLAM shortfall would be informed by future reviews. They confirmed that a reconciliation of how much water has been recovered will be completed by the end of 2026.²⁹³
- 4.16 The NSW Government informed the Committee that a number the state's projects are complete or are on track to be complete by the 31 December 2026 deadline. They acknowledged that more time and more funding is required for constraints relaxation in the Murrumbidgee and Murray. They also noted that the MDBA's implementation roadmap found this process would require a ten year program, and requires 'fit for purpose' governance arrangements.²⁹⁴
- 4.17 However, the NSW Government also informed the Committee the SDLAM reconciliation deadline cannot be extended. This is because the deadline was legislated as part of the *Water Act 2023 (Cth)*.²⁹⁵

Not all SDLAM projects are effective

- 4.18 Not all stakeholders supported SDLAM projects or an extension of the SDLAM deadline. Professor Sarah Wheeler from the College of Business, Government and Law at Flinders University, expressed concern that some SDLAM projects are potentially 'environmentally damaging'.²⁹⁶ She told us that the most cost-effective measures for increasing water efficiency had already been pursued.²⁹⁷
- 4.19 Similar evidence was received from the Environmental Defenders Office. They warned that there are potential 'adverse ecological consequences' for some SDLAM projects. They also cited a finding from the South Australian Murray-

²⁹¹ [Submission 60](#), p 15.

²⁹² [Submission 60](#), p 15; Michael Murray, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 19.

²⁹³ Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to written questions](#), 25 February 2026, p 1.

²⁹⁴ NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 13 January 2026, p 4.

²⁹⁵ NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 13 January 2026, p 4.

²⁹⁶ Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 9, 10.

²⁹⁷ Professor Sarah Wheeler, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 10.

Darling Basin Royal Commission Report 2019, which noted that buybacks are 'considerably less expensive' than recovering water via efficiency methods.²⁹⁸

- 4.20 The Committee notes stakeholders' concerns, discussed above, about ineffective or damaging projects. It agrees that the NSW Government should prioritise delivering SDLAM projects that are known to benefit the environment, and not extend the deadline for projects that have stalled.

Constraints relaxation

- 4.21 There was also some concern about the potential impacts some constraints relaxation programs might have on landholders.²⁹⁹
- 4.22 A few stakeholders mentioned the NSW Government's Reconnecting River Country program, based in the southern Basin.³⁰⁰ This is a set of reforms designed to allow rivers to connect to floodplains to improve river health. It will include using environmental water to flood private land.³⁰¹
- 4.23 Councillor Ingrid Eydling told the Committee landholders are waiting to hear how much water there would be, how often these environmental flows might occur and what flood mitigation was needed.³⁰² NSW Farmers raised similar concerns and also noted it was not clear if landholders would be compensated.³⁰³
- 4.24 The need for better communication and consultation with impacted stakeholders is discussed further in Chapter 5.

The effectiveness of supply and efficiency projects is unclear

- 4.25 On- and off-farm efficiency projects are another process through which water can be recovered for the 450GL/y of additional environmental water. Following the *Water Act 2023 (Cth)*, the Australian Government is funding projects across the Basin that allow irrigators to use less water. This program is called the 'Resilient Rivers Infrastructure Program'.³⁰⁴
- 4.26 The Australian Government told the Committee that they are funding \$520 million worth of efficiency programs across the Basin. They expect funded projects will deliver around 20GL of water towards the 450GL. They informed the Committee that previous programs had recovered 29GL of water for the environment.³⁰⁵

²⁹⁸ Commissioner Bret Walker SC, [Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission Report](#), January 2019; Environmental Defenders Office, [Response to written questions](#), 14 January 2026, p 2.

²⁹⁹ [Submission 60](#), pp 4, 16; [Submission 82](#), NSW Farmers, pp 6, 7; [Submission 92](#), Cr Ingrid Eydling, pp 1-2.

³⁰⁰ [Submission 71](#), Amanda Barlow, p 1; [Submission 82](#), pp 6, 7; [Submission 92](#), pp 1-2.

³⁰¹ NSW Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Reconnecting River Country Program](#), accessed 23 March 2026; NSW Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Murrumbidgee Project – Reconnecting River Country Program](#), accessed 23 March 2026.

³⁰² [Submission 92](#), Councillor Ingrid Eydling, pp 1-2.

³⁰³ [Submission 82](#), pp 6, 7.

³⁰⁴ Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Resilient Rivers Program](#), accessed 4 March 2026.

³⁰⁵ Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Answers to written questions](#), 25 February 2026, p 2.

- 4.27 The Committee received limited evidence about the effectiveness of these projects.
- 4.28 Cotton Australia told the Committee that the Australian and NSW governments should be prioritising water recovery through on- and off-farm efficiency, rather than buybacks.³⁰⁶ However, they also noted there may not be overwhelming interest in these programs.³⁰⁷ Leeton Shire Council informed us that the NSW Government should be advocating for environmental objectives to be achieved from 'targeted infrastructure and on-farm efficiency projects'.³⁰⁸
- 4.29 Cr Darrell Tiemens, Mayor of Narrabri Shire Council, said that there are improvements to be made in technology to increase yields in farms and industry.³⁰⁹ He told the Committee that infrastructure and complementary measures would be a better approach to restore rivers.³¹⁰
- 4.30 However, as with SDLAM projects, some stakeholders expressed concern that infrastructure upgrades were not an economically efficient method of recovering water or supporting communities.³¹¹ Professor Sarah Wheeler and colleagues cited data that suggests the cost per mil for efficiency projects towards the 450GL is \$13,535 per ML. This compares to \$2,135 per ML for buybacks.³¹²
- 4.31 National Parks Association of NSW and Healthy Rivers Lower Murray both cited research from Professor Wheeler and colleagues suggesting it could be more efficient to use this money to support communities through public spending on services like health or education.³¹³
- 4.32 The NSW Government told the Committee it is doing 'everything it can' to bring forward and deliver projects funded through the 'Resilient Rivers Infrastructure' program by the 31 December 2027 deadline.³¹⁴

Licensing for floodplain harvesting

Summary: The regulatory framework for floodplain harvesting in NSW has largely been implemented but further work is required. These rules operate to reduce levels of water use and work continues on the rollout of the licensing regime. However, there are several challenges for the implementation of the framework and reforms are needed to ensure it operates as intended.

- 4.33 It is clear there is room for improving the regulation of floodplain harvesting to support irrigators to accurately monitor their water use. This ongoing work is

³⁰⁶ [Submission 85](#), Cotton Australia, pp 5-6.

³⁰⁷ Michael Murray, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 19.

³⁰⁸ [Submission 97](#), Leeton Shire Council, p 2.

³⁰⁹ Cr Darrell Tiemens, Mayor, Narrabri Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, pp 2, 7-8.

³¹⁰ Cr Darrell Tiemens, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 2.

³¹¹ [Submission 62](#), National Parks Association of NSW, p 3; [Submission 19](#), Healthy Rivers Lower Murray, p 2; [Submission 49](#), Professor Sarah Wheeler, Professor Quentin Grafton, Professor Jeff Connor, Professor John Quiggin, Professor Lin Crase, Professor Alec Zuo and Professor Darla Hatton MacDonald, p 3.

³¹² [Submission 49](#), p 3.

³¹³ [Submission 19](#), p 2; [Submission 62](#), p 3.

³¹⁴ [Submission 31](#), NSW Government, p 8.

important to ensuring floodplain harvesting is consistent with water use targets and is sustainable.

- 4.34 Floodplain harvesting rules govern the way that water is captured by water users when it is flowing across floodplains, generally during flooding. The licensing of water taken through floodplain harvesting is the last major form of water take to be licensed in NSW. It is regulated under the *Water Management Act 2000 (NSW)*.³¹⁵
- 4.35 Floodplain harvesting refers to one way water is captured on people's properties during floods before it can enter waterways. Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia, told us that it is a long standing practice.³¹⁶ Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited said that implementation of floodplain harvesting reforms is critical to ensure sustainable diversion limits are implemented and ensure equity for irrigators.³¹⁷
- 4.36 Groups argued licensing of floodplain harvesting will reduce water use. Gwydir Valley Irrigators' Association also said that licencing of floodplain harvesting has reduced the water that can be accessed by members.³¹⁸ Namoi Water said that there has been up to a 30 per cent reduction in the amount of water available to users in the Gwydir.³¹⁹
- 4.37 Stakeholders recognised that floodplain harvesting reform is an important part of improving water resource management in the Basin.³²⁰ Murray River Council said that it recognises the need to address floodplain harvesting compliance, particularly in the northern Basin. This is because it has contributed to devastation of the Darling River, effectively disconnecting it from the Murray River.³²¹
- 4.38 Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council Inc said the reforms are significant as it is the largest transfer of water out of the industry since water recovery under the Basin Plan. They said irrigators accept the reform as it is important environmentally and helps NSW meet its obligations under the Basin Plan.³²² Cotton Australia acknowledged that floodplain harvesting regulation reform was long overdue but was thorough.³²³

Status of floodplain harvesting regulation

- 4.39 The floodplain harvesting licensing framework restricts the amount of water that is taken to individual licence limits and requires water take to be measured and

³¹⁵ [Submission 31](#), p 11.

³¹⁶ Michael Murray, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 16.

³¹⁷ [Submission 33](#), p 5.

³¹⁸ [Submission 23](#), Gwydir Valley Irrigators' Association, p 9.

³¹⁹ [Submission 45](#), Namoi Water, p 5.

³²⁰ [Submission 26](#), Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council Inc, p 4; [Submission 33](#), p 5; [Submission 74](#), Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, p 2.

³²¹ [Submission 25](#), Murray River Council, p 5.

³²² [Submission 26](#), p 4.

³²³ [Submission 85](#), p 9.

reported on. This allows the NSW Government to monitor use and restrict any growth to ensure it stays within legal limits through compliance action.³²⁴

- 4.40 The regulatory framework has been implemented in four NSW Valleys: the Border Rivers, Gwydir, Macquarie and Barwon-Darling. In the final valley, the Namoi, the NSW Government anticipates that licences will have been created, and water credited to the water account by May 2025.³²⁵ The NSW Irrigators' Council said the use of floodplain water in these areas accounts for about 76 per cent of the entire floodplain water take in the northern Basin. The remaining 24 per cent is being used in the Namoi area.³²⁶
- 4.41 Irrigator groups also noted that floodplain harvesting is now licensed in most valleys and irrigators are largely compliant.³²⁷ Namoi Water noted that floodplain harvesting is fully licensed in nearly every northern Basin valley and is subject to strict caps on volumes of water take, metering requirements and environmental conditions.³²⁸ Barwon-Darling Water also noted that it is regulated, licensed, measured and accounted for in the Sustainable Diversion Limits of the Basin Plan.³²⁹

Issues with floodplain harvesting

- 4.42 While floodplain harvesting is now largely regulated, some groups argued it undermines effective water management. This is because it is hard to accurately measure the amount of water that is taken, monitor compliance, and impacts connectivity between rivers and creeks.
- 4.43 The National Parks Association of NSW argued that floodplain harvesting is a 'clear and present danger' to riparian communities.³³⁰ Healthy Rivers Lower Murray said that licenses recently issued will increase the amount of water taken from upstream reaches, particularly in low flows. They are concerned minor floods and flushes could be removed and argue that licence holders are able to take up to 500 per cent of their entitlement in one year.³³¹
- 4.44 Floodplain harvesting impacts overland flows and river connectivity. Jenny Crew, Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre, said that floodplain harvesting interferes with rivers as water is taken out and is not going where it's naturally supposed to go. This means the wetlands are not being watered and will diminish in value.³³²

³²⁴ Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 2.

³²⁵ [Submission 31](#), p 11.

³²⁶ [Submission 83](#), p 13.

³²⁷ [Submission 83](#), p 8.

³²⁸ [Submission 45](#), p 5.

³²⁹ [Submission 63](#), Barwon-Darling Water, p 3.

³³⁰ [Submission 62](#), p 4.

³³¹ [Submission 19](#), p 3.

³³² Jenny Crew, Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 33.

- 4.45 Similarly, Muray Regional Strategy Group said that expansion of irrigation, including floodplain harvesting does not allow sufficient connectivity flows between the Murray and Darling Rivers, except for very wet years.³³³
- 4.46 Garry Hall, President, Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, similarly talked about concerns that floodplain harvesting impacts wetlands. He said since floodplain harvesting licenses were issued in the Macquarie there has not been a flood of such a level that water could be taken from the floodplain. He is worried it will lead to more water being extracted from northern Basin rivers, which could impact water use targets, although he has not seen that occur yet.³³⁴

Need to improve regulation and metering

- 4.47 Other groups are critical of allowing floodplain harvesting and recognise the need to address unlicensed take.³³⁵ The National Parks Association of NSW said allowing floodplain harvesting provides an unfair advantage to farmers in the northern Basin and is a danger to the health of floodplain communities.³³⁶ Speak Up Campaign Inc said unlicensed floodplain harvesting is occurring.³³⁷
- 4.48 The Pastoralists' Association of West Darling said that while licenses allow lawful extraction of water, there are issues with some of the rules, such as the carryover rule. This is a concern for downstream communities following the implementation of the Restoring Our Rivers Act.³³⁸
- 4.49 Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation also raised the issue of unlicensed take of floodplain water. They said there are significant implications for downstream and riparian communities when use is unregulated. The gains made by Commonwealth water recovery could also be undermined without strong enforceable rules. They want to see strict and transparent rules including mandatory metering, telemetry, enforcement mechanisms and alignment of NSW and Australian Government frameworks to prevent illegal water take.³³⁹
- 4.50 Ed Fessey, floodplain grazier and community member, talked about the problems arising from lack of accurate measurements. He referred to comments made by the Inspector-General of Water Compliance who said that only 20 per cent of floodplain licence holders have the means of measuring the water they use in floodplain harvesting.³⁴⁰
- 4.51 Other groups also supported stricter rules and compliance monitoring.³⁴¹ Terry Smith, Senior Vice President, Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, said

³³³ [Submission 65](#), Muray Regional Strategy Group, p 11.

³³⁴ Garry Hall, President, Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 12.

³³⁵ [Submission 65](#), p 8.

³³⁶ [Submission 62](#), p 4.

³³⁷ [Submission 64](#), Speak Up Campaign Inc, p 5.

³³⁸ [Submission 66](#), Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, p 2.

³³⁹ [Submission 74](#), p 2.

³⁴⁰ Ed Fessey, Floodplain Grazier and Community Member, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 15.

³⁴¹ [Submission 97](#), p 4.

reviewing floodplain harvesting allocations and carryover entitlements could be a way to recover more water in the northern Basin.³⁴²

Many irrigator groups are critical of floodplain harvesting regulations

- 4.52 Some irrigators experienced challenges with floodplain harvesting regulatory processes, considering them impractical. Tony Thompson, irrigator, and the Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association both raised difficulties with the metering requirements. They noted that metering is both expensive and difficult to install.³⁴³
- 4.53 Namoi Water said the delays in the implementation of floodplain harvesting licensing are administrative, rather than stakeholder driven.³⁴⁴ They also raised issues with the triggers for allowing take of floodplain water. The NSW Irrigators' Council gave the example of lifting the threshold in Menindee Lakes from 195 GL to 250 GL before floodplain harvesting can be used.³⁴⁵
- 4.54 Louise Gall, Executive Officer, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, also talked about implementation issues, telling us that the metering system is not linked with the water accounting system.³⁴⁶
- 4.55 Jim Cush, Vice Chair, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, also talked about these issues and said delays in the process have been frustrating and comes with an economic cost.³⁴⁷

Opportunities to improve environmental outcomes

Summary: There are different environmental challenges across the Murray-Darling Basin and it is important to use a range of strategies to improve environmental health and water quality. Specific strategies should be prioritised by the NSW Government to manage water resources and improve ecosystem health.

Recommendation 9

That the NSW Government improve its support and funding for water quality programs in NSW, including programs to:

- **minimise the impacts of European carp in NSW's rivers**
- **reinstate rock weirs impacting fish passageways**
- **improve drinking water.**

³⁴² Terry Smith, Senior Vice President, Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 9.

³⁴³ [Submission 23](#), pp 9, 10; Tony Thompson, Irrigator, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 19.

³⁴⁴ [Submission 45](#), p 5.

³⁴⁵ [Submission 83](#), p 20.

³⁴⁶ Louise Gall, Executive Officer, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 30.

³⁴⁷ Jim Cush, Vice Chair, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 30.

A range of different approaches are needed to improve environmental health in the Basin

- 4.56 A common theme in this inquiry was the need to explore opportunities to improve environmental outcomes in the Basin without requiring permanent water recovery or 'just adding water'.³⁴⁸
- 4.57 This requires an increased focus on water quality programs and other complementary measures raised by stakeholders to make the most out of water that has already been recovered. A number of environmental issues persist, particularly populations of carp and poor water quality.³⁴⁹

Complementary measures

- 4.58 Complementary measures are other programs, strategies or policies that can be used to achieve environmental outcomes.³⁵⁰ These include things like infrastructure, removing constraints and fish passageways. These target specific environmental outcomes without requiring buybacks or rule changes. A number of stakeholders from the agricultural industry said they wanted to further explore complementary measures.³⁵¹ Jackie Kruger, General Manager, Leeton Shire Council, said complementary measures will go a long way to getting the rivers back into a good state.³⁵²
- 4.59 Jeff King, Chair, Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, said he wanted to see more research into how to better use the environmental water that is already available.³⁵³
- 4.60 Connie Mort, Senior Policy Adviser, NSW Farmers, said that NSW Farmers support projects that deliver water savings without reducing or removing water from production, on the condition that they are supported by the community.³⁵⁴
- 4.61 Stakeholders identified a range of policies, programs or regulations that can be used to improve environmental outcomes without relying on buybacks, such as:
- addressing water quality by regulating the quality of inflows from mining³⁵⁵
 - fish screens on water extraction pumps³⁵⁶

³⁴⁸ Justin Sutherland, Non-Executive Member Director, Coleambally Branch, Ricegrowers' Association of Australia, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 27.

³⁴⁹ Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 4.

³⁵⁰ Michael Murray, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 17.

³⁵¹ Richard Bootle, Chair, Water Taskforce, NSW Farmers, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 16; Tom Green, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 24; Christine Freak, Water Policy Consultant to Murrumbidgee Irrigation, and Managing Director, Riviere Consulting Pty Ltd, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 39; Cr Darrell Tiemens, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 2; Cotton Australia, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 13 November 2025, pp 2-3.

³⁵² Jackie Kruger, General Manager, Leeton Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2024, pp 9-10.

³⁵³ Jeff King, Chair, Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 39.

³⁵⁴ Connie Mort, Senior Policy Adviser, NSW Farmers, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 16.

³⁵⁵ Elena Garcia, Convenor, Clean Water for Rivers, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 2.

³⁵⁶ Dr Jonathon Howard, National Parks Association of NSW, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 3.

- addressing constraints to the flow of water³⁵⁷
- prioritising environmental water above general security licences³⁵⁸
- fish passageways across weirs³⁵⁹
- invasive species management.³⁶⁰

4.62 Stakeholders gave examples of programs that could improve biodiversity outcomes on farms.³⁶¹ Ron McCalman, Chief Executive Officer, Murray Irrigation Limited, discussed the Restoring Murray Waterways project which has positive initiatives to support environmental outcomes without requiring buybacks.³⁶² This project delivers targeted environmental water using infrastructure which can be used to provide refuge for animals during periods of drought, prevent fish deaths and maintain wetlands.³⁶³

4.63 While complementary measures are important, there are limits to the effectiveness of technology. Professor Sarah Wheeler argued there is a limit to how effectively technology can improve environmental outcomes. She said that billions have been spent on technological solutions in the Basin but as there is a limit, at some point more water is needed.³⁶⁴

Improving the connectivity of the Basin

4.64 Improving river and catchment connectivity, and removing constraints is a major issue in the Basin and would improve fish populations across the Basin.³⁶⁵ Dr Jonathon Howard from the National Parks Association of NSW said constraints are affecting the ability to deliver environmental water down the rivers, and that we are not getting the volumes that are required.³⁶⁶

4.65 Water quality could improve with improved connectivity. Arthur Davies, member, Wilcannia Tourism Association, said that improving connectivity will improve water quality. One way to do this is to lift minimum pumping heights to enable connectivity to flow through the system.³⁶⁷

4.66 Richard Unsworth, a community member in Menindee also talked about the importance of inter-system connectivity from the north to the south. He

³⁵⁷ Richard Bootle, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 16; John Nikolic, President, Griffith Business Chamber, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 29.

³⁵⁸ Garry Hall, President, Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 12.

³⁵⁹ Christine Freak, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 39.

³⁶⁰ Tom Green, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 24.

³⁶¹ Robbie Sefton, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 13.

³⁶² Ron McCalman, Chief Executive Officer, Murray Irrigation Limited, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 18.

³⁶³ [Submission 72](#), Murray Irrigation, p 3.

³⁶⁴ Professor Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 14.

³⁶⁵ Dr Jonathon Howard, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 3.

³⁶⁶ Dr Jonathon Howard, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 5.

³⁶⁷ Arthur Davies, Member, Wilcannia Tourism Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 4.

recommended installing a fish passageway at the main weir in Menindee.³⁶⁸ He noted that the recommendations from the report of the NSW Office of the Chief Scientist and Engineer into the fish deaths in Menindee have helped the community and government to better manage water quality,³⁶⁹ and that monitoring in the Menindee weir pool has been an important strategy to prevent further fish deaths.³⁷⁰

- 4.67 Ultimately the Basin needs to be managed as a whole in an integrated way. Justin McClure, Australian Floodplain Association, said the 'Basin needs to be managed as a basin.'³⁷¹ Likewise, Michael Murray said that concentration needs to be on holistic management.³⁷²

Carp need to be urgently addressed to improve environmental health

- 4.68 The Committee acknowledges that carp is a major issue and management responses should focus on reducing their populations moving forward. The Committee recognises that addressing this issue would significantly improve environmental outcomes without the need to recover more water from licence holders.
- 4.69 Addressing the populations of European carp would significantly support the health of the Basin. The Committee was informed that this is because carp have had a significant impact on the environmental health of rivers in the Basin.³⁷³ Ian Cole, Executive Officer, Barwon-Darling Water, talked about how the carp stir up the river mud, destroy fish habitat and reduce weeds in the sides of the river. He said it is a massive issue that is impacting water quality programs.³⁷⁴
- 4.70 Soroptimist International Griffith Inc said that addressing the numbers of carp in the rivers is the 'most pressing issue' as there are estimated to be 350 million carp and as a result 90 per cent less native fish.³⁷⁵ Mick Coffey, Executive Officer, Namoi Water, said that this biomass of carp is the biggest degrader of the river.³⁷⁶
- 4.71 The Murray-Darling Basin Authority said that carp make up around 50-60 per cent of the biomass of fish in the river and up to 80-90 per cent in some rivers.³⁷⁷ Cr

³⁶⁸ Richard Unsworth, [Transcript of evidence](#), 12 August 2025, p 6.

³⁶⁹ NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer, [Independent review into the 2023 fish deaths in the Darling-Baaka River at Menindee](#), 29 September 2023.

³⁷⁰ Richard Unsworth, [Transcript of evidence](#), 12 August 2025, p 8.

³⁷¹ Justin McClure, Australian Floodplain Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 17.

³⁷² Michael Murray, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 17.

³⁷³ [Submission 17](#), Douglas McWilliam, p 1; [Submission 22](#), Soroptimist International Griffith Inc, p 2; [Submission 25](#), p 3; [Submission 32](#), Southern Riverina Irrigators, p 7; [Submission 83](#), p 10; [Submission 85](#), Cotton Australia, p 6; [Submission 88](#), Murray Darling Association (Region 9), p 2; Trevor Clark, President, Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 30; Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 4.

³⁷⁴ Ian Cole, Executive Officer, Barwon-Darling Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, pp 24-25.

³⁷⁵ [Submission 22](#), p 2.

³⁷⁶ Mick Coffey, Executive Officer, Namoi Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 25.

³⁷⁷ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [Answers to written questions](#), 14 January 2026, p 1.

Doug Curran, Mayor of Griffith City Council, said carp are the biggest factor in improving the health of the system.³⁷⁸

- 4.72 Managing carp should be a focus of future management strategies. Cr Shari Blumer, Chair and National President, Murray Darling Association (Region 9), and Councillor, Griffith City Council, said that carp and their effect on the river system is something that all sides of politics could get behind.³⁷⁹ Several stakeholders wanted to see more investment in carp management, like the carp herpes virus, to address the problem.³⁸⁰
- 4.73 Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, said that fixing the carp issue would make a big improvement to water quality, although there are other things that need to be done.³⁸¹

Addressing water quality is critical to improving the health of the Basin

- 4.74 The Committee recognises the need to strengthen the water management framework to refine its focus on improving water quality. Water quality is not being adequately managed and needs to be improved so that the environmental health of the Basin can recover.
- 4.75 Poor water quality continues to be a concern raised by a wide range of stakeholders.³⁸² Gary Mooring, Vice President, Louth Chamber of Commerce, said water quality is the Louth community's biggest issue, and they do not have the water quality they used to.³⁸³ Dan Schulz, PhD Researcher, said since the 2023 fish kills there has been a focus on water quality which has been a successful way to think about water.³⁸⁴
- 4.76 The Murray-Darling Basin Authority told us that there are two key drivers of poor water quality across the Basin. These are changes and reduction in flows from extraction, and the increase in pollutants from catchment disturbance. These drivers, combined with climate change and increasing variability, contribute to poor water quality resulting in fish deaths.³⁸⁵
- 4.77 Some groups talked how good water flows and volumes are important for water quality. Krystle Evans, Senior Project Officer, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, said issues with water quality is about river flows and that water quality gets worse going downstream along the Baaka (Darling River). She said it is the

³⁷⁸ Cr Doug Curran, Mayor, Griffith City Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 19.

³⁷⁹ Cr Shari Blumer, Chair and National President, Murray Darling Association (Region 9), and Councillor, Griffith City Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 18.

³⁸⁰ Jackie Kruger, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, pp 9-10; Mick Coffey, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 26; Louise Gall, Executive Officer, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 32.

³⁸¹ Mitchell Isaacs, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 4.

³⁸² [Submission 22](#), p 2; Cr Shari Blumer, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 18; Dr Simon Banks, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 14; Jonathon Howard, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 2.

³⁸³ Gary Mooring, Vice President, Louth Chamber of Commerce, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 9.

³⁸⁴ Dan Schulz, PhD Researcher, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 15.

³⁸⁵ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [Answers to written questions](#), 14 January 2026, p 1.

way the river is managed in a piecemeal way instead of as a whole system.³⁸⁶ Cassidy Kennedy, Chair, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, told the Committee that the poor water quality is because there are less flows coming down the river.³⁸⁷

- 4.78 The Committee heard that making more water available may not improve water quality.³⁸⁸ Mitchell Isaacs told us that sometimes water recovery won't be enough to achieve certain environmental outcomes.³⁸⁹
- 4.79 Addressing water quality is a complex problem. Arthur Davies of Wilcannia Tourism Association, said it's going to be very hard to address water quality because 'we've ruined it'.³⁹⁰
- 4.80 The Murray-Darling Basin Authority outlined the most effective strategies to improve water quality, including by:
- restoring and managing flows to improve connectivity to dilute and flush pollutants
 - better integrate land and water management
 - improve catchment health and reduce the inflows of nutrients by improving agricultural practices
 - better monitoring and data management to improve adaptive management
 - clarifying roles and responsibilities of NSW agencies that manage water quality.³⁹¹

Access to clean and adequate drinking water remains a concern in regional NSW

- 4.81 Town water supply needs to be better protected as the water supply for many regional towns is at risk. While it is an obligation under the regulatory framework, including the *Water Act 2007 (Cth)*, there are concerns drinking water obligations are not being met by government.³⁹²
- 4.82 Access to safe and adequate drinking water is a concern for communities in regional NSW.³⁹³ Rhonda Hynch, Chair of the Wilcannia Community Working Party and Barkandji Prescribed Body Corporate Ranger, said that when water quality is poor, people can become sick and this sometimes means they have to

³⁸⁶ Krystle Evans, Senior Project Officer, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 8.

³⁸⁷ Cassidy Kennedy, Chair, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 9.

³⁸⁸ Johanna Barnard, Manager, Sumar Produce, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 16; Christine Freak, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 39.

³⁸⁹ Mitchell Isaacs, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 3.

³⁹⁰ Arthur Davies, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 4.

³⁹¹ Murray-Darling Basin Authority, [Answers to written questions](#), 14 January 2026, pp 1-2.

³⁹² [Submission 30](#), Mark Merritt, pp 5-6.

³⁹³ [Submission 86](#), Central NSW Joint Organisation, p 3; Shari Blumer, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 18.

buy water. She wanted the government to look into potential contamination from chemicals in the river.³⁹⁴

- 4.83 Water security is a particular concern for small regional council areas.³⁹⁵ Cr Lachlan Ford, Mayor of Bourke Shire Council, said water security is their top strategic priority. A reliable and sustainable supply of water is required for Bourke to properly function.³⁹⁶ The Central NSW Joint Organisation stated that water security in central NSW is a critical issue and climate variability poses significant risks to town water supplies. They said this is because water is largely missing from strategic plans and the NSW Government strategic planning framework.³⁹⁷
- 4.84 Environmental issues in the Basin put stress on drinking water resources. Cr Shari Blumer said that for some smaller towns, drinking water be negatively impacted by periods of drought. She was worried that drinking water was not a priority and may be impacted by buybacks taking water out of the consumptive pool.³⁹⁸
- 4.85 Climate change is also putting pressure on drinking water supplies. Mitchell Isaacs said the reduction in water availability due to climate change is something that will need to be factored into planning for the coming decades, to make sure a town does not run out of water.³⁹⁹
- 4.86 The Central NSW Joint Organisation also raised this concern, noting that when protecting the environment, it is important not to overlook water for critical human needs and food production.⁴⁰⁰ Murrumbidgee Irrigation said providing safe and reliable drinking water is paramount, but providing this should not impact irrigators without compensation.⁴⁰¹
- 4.87 Drinking water contamination was also raised as a concern for Narrabri. Cr Darrell Tiemens, Mayor of Narrabri Shire Council, said that PFAS, also known as 'forever chemicals' from firefighting foams has contaminated drinking water supplies which is adding additional pressure on the town. This is a direct threat to people and industries and puts the entire region at risk.⁴⁰²

Further investment is needed to secure drinking water supplies in regional NSW

- 4.88 Michael Murray, General Manager of Cotton Australia told us that it is crucial for the NSW Government to underpin town water and community water supplies.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁴ Rhonda Hynch, Chair, Wilcannia Community Working Party and Barkandji Prescribed Body Corporate Ranger, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 12.

³⁹⁵ [Submission 29](#), Country Women's Association of NSW, p 1; [Submission 86](#), Central NSW Joint Organisation, p 3.

³⁹⁶ Cr Lachlan Ford, Mayor, Bourke Shire Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 3.

³⁹⁷ [Submission 86](#), p 3.

³⁹⁸ Cr Shari Blumer, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 18.

³⁹⁹ Mitchell Isaacs, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 6.

⁴⁰⁰ [Submission 86](#), p 4.

⁴⁰¹ Murrumbidgee Irrigation, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 14 August 2025, p 3.

⁴⁰² Cr Darrell Tiemens, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 3.

⁴⁰³ Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia, [Transcript of evidence](#), 9 October 2025, p 19.

- 4.89 It was argued to the Committee that government should renew investment in programs to strengthen and protect drinking water supplies.⁴⁰⁴ Murrumbidgee Irrigation said that they support the prioritisation of drinking water and want to see water contamination addressed where it impacts drinking water guidelines.⁴⁰⁵

Rock weirs should be restored in the river

- 4.90 The NSW Government should consider restoring rock weirs into the Baaka (Darling River) that used to exist in the river. This could help improve environmental outcomes.
- 4.91 Arthur Davies of the Wilcannia Tourism Association, talked about the first examples of human interference with the Darling/Baaka River. He said that this was when they 'blew all of the rock bars to allow the steamers to pass through on the lower rivers'. These were a natural phenomenon that would hold water up, slow its flow, so now he thinks the river drains out when it stops flowing and can become stagnant.⁴⁰⁶
- 4.92 Justin McClure, Australian Floodplain Association, said that the rock weirs should be put back into the river.⁴⁰⁷

Improving compliance

Summary: Compliance with water laws is generally high across the Basin, in part due to the work of the Natural Resources Access Regulator in NSW. However, issues remain with improved metering needed.

Finding 6

NSW has effective measures in place for monitoring and enforcing water compliance, leading to low rates of water theft or unlicensed take.

Recommendation 10

That the NSW Government continue to expand its water metering and compliance measures, including those for floodplain harvesting, to ensure all parts of the Murray-Darling Basin are included.

- 4.93 The Natural Resources Access Regulator (NRAR) was established as an independent regulator under the *Natural Resource Access Regulator Act 2017*. NRAR oversees compliance with water laws and undertakes education, monitoring and enforcement activities across the state.⁴⁰⁸

Support for NRAR compliance work

- 4.94 The Committee is of the view that NRAR has generally ensured compliance with water laws in the Basin. To address issues raised in this section, the Committee

⁴⁰⁴ [Submission 65](#), p 10.

⁴⁰⁵ [Submission 60](#), Murrumbidgee Irrigation, p 23.

⁴⁰⁶ Arthur Davies, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 3.

⁴⁰⁷ Justin McClure, Australian Floodplain Association, [Transcript of evidence](#), 13 August 2025, p 17.

⁴⁰⁸ [Submission 31](#), p 3.

recommends improvements to metering as discussed in the section on floodplain harvesting.

- 4.95 There is strong support for the level of transparency on compliance and enforcement activities of NRAR. Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council Inc informed the Committee that NRAR reports quarterly on its compliance activities.⁴⁰⁹ NRAR also maintains an interactive dashboard that provides a summary of their monthly compliance activities.⁴¹⁰ These reports have built community confidence in the regulator's performance.
- 4.96 Stakeholders recognised that unlawful water take and unlicensed floodplain harvesting occur at low rates, largely due to NRAR's metering, monitoring, and enforcement activities.⁴¹¹ Quarterly progress reports published by the regulator indicate high compliance with water rules, suggesting that NRAR's existing powers and education programs have been effective.⁴¹²
- 4.97 Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc. and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc. expressed confidence in the high level of compliance among water users in NSW, citing NRAR's reported 99 per cent compliance rate. Based on this measure, both organisations consider the current rules and regulatory frameworks to be effective.⁴¹³ Namoi Water also holds the view that compliance rates in NSW are high and continuously improving.⁴¹⁴
- 4.98 NSW Irrigators' Council suggested risks to the effective implementation of the federal *Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023* are unlikely to be a product of unlawful water take. Instead, they are likely to be a product of technological and resource constraints.⁴¹⁵
- 4.99 The Committee was informed that with greater predicted water use, there will be less available water in the future as a result of water use and climate change. This will require more accurate measurements and make compliance more important.⁴¹⁶

Issues and suggested improvements to compliance

- 4.100 Professor Sarah Wheeler and colleagues identify three recommendations to further improve compliance across the Murray-Darling Basin:
- improving compliance data and reporting
 - increasing the probability of detection and prosecution

⁴⁰⁹ [Submission 26](#), p 3.

⁴¹⁰ NSW Government, Natural Resources Access Regulator, [Compliance activity dashboard](#), accessed 1 April 2026.

⁴¹¹ [Submission 63](#), p 3; [Submission 49](#), p 5; [Submission 83](#), p 13.

⁴¹² [Submission 82](#), p 4.

⁴¹³ [Submission 95](#), Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, p 2.

⁴¹⁴ [Submission 45](#), p 6.

⁴¹⁵ [Submission 83](#), p 3.

⁴¹⁶ [Submission 62](#), p 4.

- reforming legislation to increase penalties and regulator visibility.⁴¹⁷
- 4.101 Healthy Rivers Lower Murray noted that the installation of water and monitoring devices have not been achieved in every sub-catchment. Even implementation is required to ensure water resources are shared fairly and sustainably to ensure effective enforcement of water allocation.⁴¹⁸
- 4.102 Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation identified several unresolved risks to the implementation of the *Restoring Our Rivers Act 2023*. They maintained that unregulated floodplain harvesting remains detrimental for downstream users. They advocated for clearer and transparent rules for floodplain harvesting to ensure equitable outcomes across the entire Basin.⁴¹⁹
- 4.103 Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association suggested that the cost of compliance in NSW is excessive and argued for a fundamental review of NRAR's governance and strategic direction before further investments are made.⁴²⁰
- 4.104 Stakeholders raised concerns about inconsistent compliance scrutiny between regions. Murray River Council noted unequal scrutiny between the northern Basin and the lower Murray despite the Murray being the primary focus of water recovery activities.⁴²¹ Richmond and Wilsons Combined Water Users Association observed that federal rules designed to regulate inland water systems have been applied to Coastal Water Sharing Plans, despite significant differences in water systems, increasing costs and reducing water security.⁴²²

⁴¹⁷ [Submission 49](#), p 5.

⁴¹⁸ [Submission 19](#), p 2.

⁴¹⁹ [Submission 74](#), p 2.

⁴²⁰ [Submission 23](#), p 15.

⁴²¹ [Submission 25](#), p 6.

⁴²² [Submission 73](#), Richmond and Wilsons Combined Water Users Association, p 1-2.

Chapter Five – Supporting communities impacted by water recovery

Communication

Summary: Improved communication and consultation may help reduce the social and economic impacts of water recovery programs on regional communities. In person consultation, through dedicated local contact points or community forums would provide an opportunity to tailor communication to the needs and concerns of each community. Providing information on how stakeholder feedback has shaped policy may reduce stakeholder fatigue and improve program outcomes.

Communication with impacted communities should be improved

Recommendation 11

That the NSW Government consider in-person consultation processes, such as dedicated local contact points, to liaise with communities. Consultation should occur early enough to influence policy and the outcomes of any consultation process should also be communicated.

- 5.1 Stakeholders across NSW Basin communities highlighted issues with how the NSW and Australian governments' changes to water policy were being communicated. The Committee was informed that problems with consultation and/or the speed of reform is leading to high levels of stakeholder fatigue.⁴²³
- 5.2 The Committee agrees that genuine consultation and communication is important to the success of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and associated programs. The Committee recommends that the NSW Government use face-to-face consultation processes or dedicated contacts, based within the communities, to liaise directly with impacted communities on matters of water policy.
- 5.3 Whether occurring in person or online, the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (NSW DCCEEW) should be communicating how stakeholder feedback has been included. If this is not possible, the consultation process should include feedback from the Department about why.
- 5.4 Stakeholders raised a number of issues with how NSW DCCEEW consults stakeholders, including:
 - Reliance on webinars⁴²⁴

⁴²³ [Submission 45](#), Namoi Water, p 19; [Submission 66](#), Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, p 3; [Submission 83](#), NSW Irrigators' Council, pp 37, 47; Karen Hutchinson, Chief Executive Officer, Watertrust Australia, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 31; Bobbie Pannowitz, President, Leeton Business Chamber, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 35; Johanna Barnard, Manager, Sumar Produce, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 16; Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 6 August 2025, p 2.

⁴²⁴ [Submission 45](#), p 19; [Submission 70](#), Lachlan Valley Water Inc, p 3; [Submission 83](#), p 37.

- Department representatives lack local knowledge⁴²⁵
- Lack of action on stakeholder feedback⁴²⁶
- Speed or number of reforms⁴²⁷

5.5 Throughout the inquiry, a key concern was that the Department does not appear to be taking stakeholder feedback or suggestions on board.⁴²⁸ A common theme was that stakeholders felt 'heard' but not 'listened to'.⁴²⁹

5.6 For example, Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council (YACTAC) and NSW Irrigators' Council both noted 'What We Heard' reports appear to summarise the content of consultation sessions. However, there is no information on how or if this feedback has impacted final policy.⁴³⁰ The NSW Irrigators' Council informed us that:

When engaging in consultation, stakeholders dedicate significant time and effort into submissions, but their ideas and recommendations are rarely, if ever, incorporated into the final reform. 'What we heard' reports amount to just a summary of what the Department thinks stakeholders said in submissions, meetings and webinar... Nowhere do these reports record what the Department has taken on board from the public engagement, and if not, why not.⁴³¹

5.7 The Committee learned that consultation may also be occurring too late in the process, after policy decisions have been made.⁴³² Namoi Valley told us NSW DCCEEW seeks feedback after Water Sharing Plans (WSPs) are complete. They told us this creates the impression of 'consultation theatre'.⁴³³

5.8 Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators informed us that the pace of change also needs to slow down. They explained 'limited consultation periods, complex processes, and sheer volume of information' is putting 'immense pressure' on organisations to provide feedback.⁴³⁴

5.9 Stakeholders explained that the combination of frequent policy changes and a lack of action on stakeholder advice is leading to high levels of stakeholder

⁴²⁵ Tony Thompson, Irrigator, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 20.

⁴²⁶ [Submission 83](#), p 14; Johanna Barnard, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 16.

⁴²⁷ [Submission 45](#), p 19; [Submission 83](#), p 37; [Submission 95](#), Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, p 4; Johanna Barnard, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 16.

⁴²⁸ [Submission 83](#), pp 14, 37; Bobbie Pannowitz, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 35; Johanna Barnard, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 16.

⁴²⁹ [Submission 82](#), NSW Farmers, p 8. See, also: [Submission 83](#), p 14; Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 6 August 2025, p 2.

⁴³⁰ [Submission 83](#), p 37; Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 6 August 2025, p 2.

⁴³¹ [Submission 83](#), p 37.

⁴³² [Submission 70](#), p 3; Namoi Water, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 13 November 2025, p 8.

⁴³³ Namoi Water, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 13 November 2025, p 8.

⁴³⁴ [Submission 95](#), p 4.

fatigue.⁴³⁵ Dan Schulz, a PhD researcher at the Australian National University, described the last 30 years of consultation as 'toxic,' and noted that this may have discouraged people from participating. He said there is an attitude that consultation is an exercise of writing up feedback, and passing it on, but this is not collaborative.⁴³⁶

- 5.10 As well as impacting stakeholders, poor communication can impact the success of key Basin Plan programs.⁴³⁷ The NSW Irrigators' Council informed us there has been limited progress on constraints relaxation 'due in large part to low community trust' as well as implementation issues.⁴³⁸
- 5.11 Returning to in-person consultation may help improve engagement on changes to water policy. Some stakeholders noted that the effectiveness of engagement and collaboration has dropped as more consultation has moved online.⁴³⁹
- 5.12 For example, Lachlan Valley Council told us there used to be regional valley-specific staff. They explained that since these were removed, 'water users miss out on collaborative consultation and engagement'.⁴⁴⁰ Similarly, Tony Thompson, an irrigator in the Bourke region, told us that engagement had become a 'zoomfest' and that it is 'pretty ordinary'.⁴⁴¹
- 5.13 NSW Irrigators' Council informed us that some water users would like advisory panels to be reinstated. The panels allowed irrigators, local councils and industry, as well as individuals looking after the environment, to discuss river operations. They told us the panels met regularly. As a result, decisions on water sharing plans were transparent and collaborative.⁴⁴²
- 5.14 Another model of in-person engagement is that used by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH). CEWH is responsible for managing and releasing water purchased by the Australian Government to achieve environmental outcomes. They informed us they have eight local engagement officers living in the community. This enables them to ensure they tailor their information to meet local needs.⁴⁴³
- 5.15 NSW Irrigators provided the example of the NSW DCCEEW's approach on the 'non-urban water metering review' as an example of effective consultation. During this review, the Department organised eight consultation sessions via webinars and targeted meetings. The Department used the meetings to collect

⁴³⁵ [Submission 45](#), p 19; [Submission 66](#), p 3; [Submission 83](#), pp 37, 47; Johanna Barnard, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 16; Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 6 August 2025, p 2.

⁴³⁶ Dan Schulz, PhD Researcher, [Transcript of evidence](#), 14 August 2025, p 16.

⁴³⁷ [Submission 71](#), Amanda Barlow, p 2; [Submission 83](#), p 14; [Submission 105](#), Western Murray Land Improvement Group, pp 69-70.

⁴³⁸ [Submission 83](#), p 14.

⁴³⁹ [Submission 70](#), pp 3-4; [Submission 83](#), p 37; Tony Thompson, Irrigator, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 20.

⁴⁴⁰ [Submission 70](#), pp 3-4.

⁴⁴¹ Tony Thompson, [Transcript of evidence](#), 10 October 2025, p 20.

⁴⁴² [Submission 83](#), pp 35, 37.

⁴⁴³ Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 9 January 2026, p 3.

feedback on specific issues and, later, to explain how this had been incorporated. The NSW Irrigators' Council explained that stakeholders 'felt their concerns were heard in real time' and 'saw their feedback incorporated'.⁴⁴⁴

Transparency and information sharing on water recovery

Summary: It is important for governments to transparently communicate why more water is needed and how it is being used. Better communication of the outcomes of water recovery programs may help build community support for the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Finding 7

Improved data and communication on how recovered water is being used could help assure communities that recovery programs are benefiting the environment.

- 5.16 The Committee found there is a need for better communication and data on how recovered water is being used. Some stakeholders explained that reporting on water recovery tends to be negative.⁴⁴⁵ This can contribute to a view that further water recovery is unnecessary or is not benefiting the environment.
- 5.17 As discussed in chapter one, the Committee is of the view that the upcoming Basin Plan review should assess and account for the total water recovery across the Basin and the need for further recovery to protect the environment. However, if the science demonstrates there is a need for further buybacks, the NSW and Australian governments should communicate why this water is needed and how it is being used.
- 5.18 Professor Sarah Wheeler, from the College of Business, Government and Law at Flinders University, explained that a review of current media reporting on water recovery and buybacks showed this reporting is 'overwhelmingly negative'.⁴⁴⁶ The Committee was advised that reporting rarely discusses the positive outcomes of water purchases, whether economic or environmental. This can contribute to a view that water recovery 'has harmed rural communities'.⁴⁴⁷
- 5.19 Similarly, the Pastoralists' Association of West Darling told us that there is a lot of discussion on the negative impacts of buybacks. However, 'successive reports have failed to calculate or acknowledge the positive social, economic and environmental benefits of restoring downstream flows'.⁴⁴⁸
- 5.20 Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association expressed concern that consultation and communication on buybacks is influenced by the irrigation sector. They explained that buybacks have 'played a critical role in increasing the

⁴⁴⁴ [Submission 83](#), p 37.

⁴⁴⁵ [Submission 49](#), Professor Sarah Wheeler, Professor Quentin Grafton, Professor Jeff Connor, Professor John Quiggin, Professor Lin Crase, Professor Alec Zuo and Professor Darla Hatton MacDonald, p 1; [Submission 66](#), p 1; [Submission 100](#), Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, p 2.

⁴⁴⁶ Professor Sarah Wheeler, Professor, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 10. See, also: [Submission 49](#), p 1.

⁴⁴⁷ Professor Sarah Wheeler, [Transcript of Evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 10; [Submission 49](#), p 1.

⁴⁴⁸ [Submission 66](#), p 1.

wet periods and helped to keep the Macquarie River downstream of the Marshes ready to respond when wet periods return'.⁴⁴⁹

- 5.21 Professor Sarah Wheeler told the Committee there should be more public forums and information on the purpose and impacts of buybacks. She told us that environmental issues and the science behind them should also be explained.⁴⁵⁰
- 5.22 The CEWH, Dr Simon Banks, told the Committee that they have put a lot of effort into communicating how they are using water. They now publish a map, updated fortnightly, that outlines where water is being used. They also explained that they are using social media to communicate their outcomes, alongside other reporting.⁴⁵¹

The sustainable communities program

Summary: The sustainable communities program supports regional communities negatively impacted by buybacks and water recovery. Stakeholders discussed a range of criticisms of how the program is implemented and ways it could be improved to better support impacted communities.

- 5.23 It is clear that there are ongoing concerns with the administration of the Sustainable Communities Program (SCP). The Committee believes that the SCP should be designed through engagement with impacted communities to ensure support reaches those most in need. It should also deliver tangible outcomes that improve long term economic resilience.
- 5.24 The SCP is a support program for regional communities affected by water recovery. It is administered by the NSW Government with funding provided by the Australian Government.⁴⁵²
- 5.25 The NSW Government said that funding from the Australian Government is provided to assist communities by reducing the social and economic impacts of buybacks. They said that in 2024 the NSW and Australian government's agreed to a new funding agreement to provide \$160 million over four years to minimise the social and economic impacts of the Basin Plan.⁴⁵³
- 5.26 The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) administers the program for the NSW Government. They said that this program is designed to mitigate socio-economic impacts associated with the buybacks.⁴⁵⁴
- 5.27 The Committee was informed that this support is necessary for Basin communities. The Western Murray Land Improvement Group said that continued

⁴⁴⁹ [Submission 100](#), p 2.

⁴⁵⁰ Professor Sarah Wheeler, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 5 February 2026, p 4.

⁴⁵¹ Dr Simon Banks, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 13; Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, [Answers to supplementary questions](#), 9 January 2026, p 3.

⁴⁵² NSW Government, [NSW Sustainable Communities Program](#), accessed 14 April 2026.

⁴⁵³ [Submission 31](#), NSW Government, pp 7, 16.

⁴⁵⁴ Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, [Answers to written questions](#), 27 January 2026, p 3.

investment under the SCP is vital for them to sustain and scale the benefits of programs driving diversification and regional transformation.⁴⁵⁵

NSW Government actions under the program

- 5.28 The NSW Government said that the SCP will enable economic diversification and resilience and intends to make funding available to exposed communities as soon as possible. They said this will create sustainable local economies and encourage long term economic resilience.⁴⁵⁶
- 5.29 The SCP is to be delivered over four years in parallel with the Australian Government's water recovery program, including buybacks. DPIRD said that the four year timeframe means that there is not enough time for the program to be designed. More time is needed to develop an understanding of the socio-economic impacts of the current round of buybacks.⁴⁵⁷
- 5.30 The Committee was informed that the NSW Government will be taking a three stage approach to delivering the SCP that will proceed at the same pace as the buybacks under the Australian Government's trading strategy. The three stages are:
- an early investment round of \$15 million that opened on 13 March 2025 to target communities exposed and highly vulnerable to early rounds of buybacks
 - place-based consultation with Basin communities exposed to impacts to determine their needs and priorities
 - the substantive investment round of \$145 million for multiple streams of support to mitigate adverse socio-economic impacts.⁴⁵⁸

The NSW Government is working to ensure the SCP is targeted at communities in need

- 5.31 DPIRD advised the Committee that it is recommending the Australian Government modify the SCP to:
- provide more granular data on the outcomes and observed impacts of water buybacks to ensure support is proportional and targeted
 - provide additional funding beyond the current \$160 million, to match the anticipated losses to production and sustain NSW regional communities over the long term

⁴⁵⁵ [Submission 105](#), pp 3-4.

⁴⁵⁶ [Submission 31](#), p 17.

⁴⁵⁷ [Submission 31](#), p 21; Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, [Answers to written questions](#), 27 January 2026, p 3.

⁴⁵⁸ [Submission 31](#), p 17.

- provide more time to ensure investments provide real and positive outcomes and communities are supported to build industries that provide long term jobs and income.⁴⁵⁹

- 5.32 DPIRD said they are taking a targeted approach to eligibility to support regional areas that are vulnerable and exposed to the impacts of buybacks.⁴⁶⁰ Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, DCCEEW, said that the NSW Government uses modelling of agricultural data to understand the economic impact on agriculture from less water being available. This will determine what level of funding is necessary to offset those impacts in the southern Basin.⁴⁶¹
- 5.33 In assessing exposure to the impacts of buybacks, DPIRD consider the catchment of the trading strategy that is guiding the buybacks in the southern Basin. They consider advice from the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) on the impacts of the Water Trading Strategy.⁴⁶²
- 5.34 For vulnerability, DPIRD look at local government areas that are highly reliant on agriculture and may have limited adaptative capacity. They will use data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics to determine communities that are highly reliant on irrigated agriculture. They all also use data from ABARES to quantify vulnerability.⁴⁶³
- 5.35 They have assessed 12 local government areas in the southern Basin that are exposed, vulnerable and eligible for support.⁴⁶⁴ However, the NSW Government said that if they have more information, time and funding, they 'can provide more targeted, proportional, and needs-based support to NSW Basin communities which experience more severe impacts from water recovery.'⁴⁶⁵

Stakeholders raised significant concerns about the effectiveness of the programs

- 5.36 The Committee learnt of a range of concerns about the effectiveness of the SCP in addressing the negative impacts of buybacks.

⁴⁵⁹ Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, [Answers to written questions](#), 27 January 2026, p 3.

⁴⁶⁰ Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, [Answers to written questions](#), 27 January 2026, pp 3-4.

⁴⁶¹ Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, [Transcript of evidence](#), 28 November 2025, p 6.

⁴⁶² Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, [Answers to written questions](#), 27 January 2026, pp 3-4.

⁴⁶³ Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, [Answers to written questions](#), 27 January 2026, p 4.

⁴⁶⁴ Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, [Answers to written questions](#), 27 January 2026, p 4

⁴⁶⁵ [Submission 31](#), p 22.

- 5.37 Many stakeholders said that the funding amounts available under this program are inadequate.⁴⁶⁶ Namoi Water said that the impacts from less productive water being available in regional towns are not adequately addressed by the program. They say the programs have been underfunded, poorly targeted and incapable of addressing the scale of the impacts.⁴⁶⁷
- 5.38 There are concerns that funding may not cover the full scale of the impacts. Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc advised that the cumulative economic impact of buybacks across different industries is far greater than the \$300 million sustainability package allocated to NSW.⁴⁶⁸ Councillor John Harvie, Mayor, Edward River Council, said the NSW Government should 'aggressively pursue the Federal Government to increase the Sustainable Communities funding.'⁴⁶⁹
- 5.39 The Committee was informed that the SCP must lead to tangible outcomes. Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited said that to be effective, the program must 'make a material difference to vulnerable communities.'⁴⁷⁰ SunRice Group are concerned that the program does not target projects that create long-term jobs and lasting economic activity.⁴⁷¹

The program should be more targeted

- 5.40 The Committee heard that the SCP should be designed to target specific impacts and areas. Murray Regional Strategy Group stated that funding should be focused on the primary areas impacted by policies under the Basin Plan.⁴⁷²
- 5.41 The importance of ensuring the support reaches the communities most in need was also highlighted. SunRice Group stated that the program should target the direct impacts of water recovery in the southern Basin for affected groups in the irrigation food manufacturing sector.⁴⁷³

Opportunities to improve the Sustainable Communities Program

- 5.42 The Committee were advised of multiple ways these programs could be improved. For example, Billyanco Pty Ltd recommended that funding is ongoing, well-targeted, and flexible. They wanted to see support for on-farm diversification, reliable telecommunications and freight, and local input into priority investments.⁴⁷⁴ We heard that creating actual jobs and increasing economic resilience is a priority.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁶⁶ [Submission 23](#), Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, p 16; [Submission 33](#), Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited, p 7; [Submission 63](#), Barwon-Darling Water, pp 4-5; [Submission 69](#), Griffith City Council, p 3; [Submission 83](#), p 28; [Submission 95](#), pp 4-5; [Submission 101](#), SunRice Group, p 3.

⁴⁶⁷ [Submission 45](#), p 3.

⁴⁶⁸ [Submission 95](#), p 5

⁴⁶⁹ Councillor John Harvie, Mayor, Edward River Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 41.

⁴⁷⁰ [Submission 33](#), p 7.

⁴⁷¹ [Submission 101](#), p 7.

⁴⁷² [Submission 65](#), Murray Regional Strategy Group, p 18.

⁴⁷³ [Submission 101](#), p 7.

⁴⁷⁴ [Submission 27](#), Billyanco Pty Ltd, p 2.

⁴⁷⁵ Jack Bond, Chief Executive Officer, Edward River Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 3.

- 5.43 NSW Farmers said the programs could be designed to be more effective and fit for purpose.⁴⁷⁶ Central NSW Joint Organisation said that they need to be responsive to the evolving needs of communities impacted by water reforms. They want to see future programs being informed by lessons learned from past initiatives. This includes:
- better stakeholder engagement to involve local communities in design
 - targeted support so that it's tailored to local needs
 - monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to make changes where necessary.⁴⁷⁷
- 5.44 Many organisations told us that these programs will be more effective with co-design and being able to draw on local expertise.⁴⁷⁸ Councillor Ashley Hall, Mayor, Edward River Council, talked about developing a co-design program to ensure that people on the ground can deliver programs that provide actual jobs.⁴⁷⁹
- 5.45 Yvonne Lingua, Executive Officer, Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, said there is a lack of policy vision from the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development which is causing stress to communities. She wants it tied to a broader vision and more cohesion between agencies administering the SCP.⁴⁸⁰
- 5.46 Other suggestions raised by stakeholders include:
- long term funding certainty and more flexibility, with improved monitoring evaluation and reporting⁴⁸¹
 - identifying investment opportunities that deliver long-term jobs⁴⁸²
 - large scale projects that create training for ongoing employment⁴⁸³
 - amend funding eligibility guidelines that currently exclude a range of potential applicants such as retail, and professional services⁴⁸⁴
 - link initiatives to water savings projects to reduce reliance on buybacks.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁷⁶ [Submission 82](#), p 11.

⁴⁷⁷ [Submission 86](#), Central NSW Joint Organisation, p 6.

⁴⁷⁸ [Submission 66](#), p 3; [Submission 69](#), p 3; [Submission 74](#), Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, p 5; [Submission 86](#), p 6; [Submission 94](#), Watertrust Australia, p 2.

⁴⁷⁹ Councillor Ashley Hall, Mayor, Edward River Council, [Transcript of evidence](#), 22 July 2025, p 3.

⁴⁸⁰ Yvonne Lingua, Executive Officer, Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, [Transcript of evidence](#), 23 July 2025, p 10.

⁴⁸¹ [Submission 74](#), p 5.

⁴⁸² [Submission 85](#), Cotton Australia, p 14.

⁴⁸³ [Submission 66](#), p 3.

⁴⁸⁴ [Submission 65](#), p 18; Bobbie Pannowitz, [Transcript of evidence](#), 24 November 2025, p 34.

⁴⁸⁵ [Submission 97](#), p 3.

Appendix One – Terms of reference

That the Committee on Investment, Industry and Regional Development inquire into and report on the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities, with particular reference to:

- a) the social, economic and environmental impact of repealing limits to the cap on Commonwealth water purchases
- b) the risks to the effective implementation of the Federal Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 including unlicensed take of water and options to address these risks such as rules for floodplain harvesting
- c) the impact of Planned Environmental Water rules on the reliability of water allocations in NSW and the Commonwealth's environmental water holdings
- d) the impact of rules-based changes on the reliability of water allocations in NSW, including their impact on different water license categories
- e) the effectiveness and impacts of past water reforms, including community-based water reduction adjustment programs such as the Strengthening Basin Communities program and Murray-Darling Basin Economic Development Program
- f) options to improve future community-based reduction adjustment programs including next rounds of the Sustainable Communities Program
- g) other NSW water reforms impacting water allocations and landholder rights, including harvestable rights
- h) the provisions of the Water Management Amendment (Intergovernmental Agreements) Bill 2025
- i) any other related matter

Appendix Two – Conduct of inquiry

The inquiry into the impacts of the *Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023* on NSW regional communities was self-referred on 21 November 2024, with terms of reference adopted 17 February 2025. The terms of reference for the inquiry are at Appendix One.

The Committee invited key stakeholders to make a submission to the inquiry. Submissions closed on 14 April 2025. The Committee received 107 submissions from a range of stakeholders, including community members, businesses, industry representatives, local councils, academics and others. A list of submissions is at Appendix Three, and they are also available on the inquiry's [webpage](#).

The Committee held 10 public hearings as part of the inquiry:

- Deniliquin, 22 July 2025
- Griffith, 23 July 2025
- Menindee, 12 August 2025
- Wilcannia, 13 August 2025
- Broken Hill, 14 August 2025
- Narrabri, 9 October 2025
- Bourke, 10 October 2025
- Parliament House, Sydney, 24 November 2025
- Parliament House, Sydney, 28 November 2025
- Parliament House, Sydney, 2 December 2025

The Committee also held two private briefings to inform their understanding of water policy in the Murray-Darling Basin. At these private briefings, the Committee heard from department officials, academics and water consultants.

Regional public hearings and site visits

As part of the inquiry, the Committee travelled across regional NSW to hear first-hand how water policy reform has impacted communities in the Murray-Darling Basin. This included regional hearings and site visits in the southern and northern Basin, and Far West NSW.

Southern Basin (Tuppal Creek, Deniliquin and Griffith) – 21-23 July 2025

On 21 July the Committee conducted a site visit at Tuppal Creek, a tributary of the Murray River, with staff from the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. The Committee viewed a water infrastructure project that aims to remove physical constraints to river flows and fish passage. These projects were part of the Sustainable

Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism program. The Committee visited two sites, with one site almost completed and another project still in construction. The Committee learnt how projects like this are designed and implemented in partnership with landholders and the benefits they provide for the environment and communities.

The Committee also held public hearings in Deniliquin and Griffith on 22 and 23 July respectively. At these hearings, the Committee heard about the impacts water buybacks have had on communities in the southern Basin.

Far West (Menindee, Wilcannia and Broken Hill) – 12-14 August 2025

From 12-14 August the Committee travelled to Menindee, Wilcannia and Broken Hill, holding regional public hearings in each of these towns. The Committee heard how important water is to these communities, both culturally and economically. It heard that the health of the Darling/Baaka has been declining for years. It also received evidence about the importance of water security for town and drinking water.

Northern Basin (Narrabri and Bourke) – 9-10 October 2025

On 9 and 10 October the Committee held public hearings in Narrabri and Bourke respectively. The Committee heard how important water is to agriculture and grazing as well as the economic impacts of declining agricultural activity in the towns. It also heard about challenges in accessing secure drinking water and responding to changes in state water policy. While in Bourke, the Committee visited Prattenville, a cotton farm managed by Tony Thompson, to learn about irrigation practices and the impacts of recent water policy reforms such as floodplain harvesting licensing. Practical issues with water metering and compliance were also raised.

Parliament House public hearings, Sydney

The Committee also held three public hearings at Parliament House in Sydney on 24 November, 28 November and 2 December, where it heard from local community stakeholders, academics, industry representatives and the NSW Government. This evidence reinforced the complexity of water management in the Murray-Darling Basin, and the need for solutions that balance environmental considerations against the potential negative impacts of water recovery programs.

Appendix Three – Submissions

No.	Author
1	Mr Lewis Pierotti
2	Ms Deidre Howard
3	Confidential
4	Mr Aaron Taylor
5	Mrs Joanna Loughridge
6	Ms Sarah Edwards
7	Mrs Edna Penning
8	Mr Greg Murphy
9	Confidential
10	Mrs Kristina Irvine
11	Ms Susan Braybon
12	Mr Paul Rogerson
13	Confidential
14	Confidential
15	Mr William Lord
16	Ms Gen Campbell
17	Mr Douglas McWilliam
18	Confidential
19	Healthy Rivers Lower Murray
20	Mr Steven Fawns
21	Ms Tracy Sorensen
22	Soroptimist International Griffith Inc
23	Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association (GVIA)
23a	Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association (GVIA)
24	Mrs Bronwyn Wannan
25	Murray River Council
26	Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council Inc
27	Billyanco Pty Ltd
28	Mrs Jeanine Bird
29	Country Women's Association of NSW
30	Mr Mark Merritt
31	NSW Government

No.	Author
32	Southern Riverina Irrigators
33	Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited
34	NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC)
35	Mudgee Region Action Group
36	Ms Shaz Tinant
37	Mrs Sarah Inglis
38	Mr Jamie Inglis
39	Mr Richie Inglis
40	Miss Maddison O'Brien
41	Mrs Maureen Boller
42	Miss Sarah Harvey
43	Mr Alex Wisser
44	Ms Lyn Coombe
45	Namoi Water
46	Confidential
47	Ms Stephanie Luke
48	Ms Lara Altimira
49	Professor Sarah Wheeler, Professor Quentin Grafton, Professor Jeff Connor, Professor John Quiggin, Professor Lin Crase, Professor Alec Zuo and Professor Darla Hatton MacDonald
50	Mr Michael Boller
51	Mudgee Region Health Alliance
52	Ms Janet Walk
53	Mr Richard Ham
54	Centre for Technology in Water & Wastewater - University of Technology Sydney
55	Mr Adrian Milne
56	Mrs Barbara Duff
57	Mid-Western Regional Council
58	Confidential
59	Confidential
60	Murrumbidgee Irrigation
61	Ricegrowers' Association of Australia
61a	Ricegrowers' Association of Australia
62	National Parks Association of NSW
63	Barwon-Darling Water

No.	Author
64	Speak Up Campaign Inc
65	Murray Regional Strategy Group
66	Pastoralists' Association of West Darling
67	Griffith Business Chamber
68	Ms Judith Brown
69	Griffith City Council
70	Lachlan Valley Water Inc
71	Mrs Amanda Barlow
72	Murray Irrigation
73	Richmond and Wilsons Combined Water Users Association
74	Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation
75	Mrs Sonia Christie
76	Mr Daniel Pinnuck
77	Ms Jolieske Lips
78	Water for Rivers
79	Running Stream Water Users Association
80	Macquarie River Food and Fibre
81	Ms Andrea Driver
82	NSW Farmers
83	New South Wales Irrigators' Council
83a	New South Wales Irrigators' Council
84	Currie Country Social Change
85	Cotton Australia
86	Central NSW Joint Organisation
87	Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Network
88	Murray Darling Association (Region 9)
89	Inverell Shire Council
90	Mr Geoff Chapman
91	City of Wagga Wagga
92	Cr Ingrid Eyding
93	Ms Chenelle Hitchcock
94	Watertrust Australia
95	Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc
96	Central Murray Environmental Floodplains Group Inc
97	Leeton Shire Council

No.	Author
98	Nature Conservation Council of NSW
99	Quambone Pastoral Co. Pty Ltd
100	Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA)
101	SunRice Group
102	Matrix Commodities Pty Ltd
103	Ms Frances Pietroboni
104	Southern Riverina Irrigators
105	Western Murray Land Improvement Group
106	Mr Dan Schulz
107	Confidential

Appendix Four – Witnesses

22 July 2025

Deniliquin Town Hall, Deniliquin, NSW

Witness	Position and Organisation
Mayor Ashley Hall	Councillor, Edward River Council
Mr Jack Bond	Chief Executive Officer, Edward River Council
Mr Robert Brown	Family Business Consultant, Peppin Family Consulting, Deniliquin Business Chamber
Ms Robbie Sefton AM	Founder, Sefton & Associates Pty Ltd
Ms Sophie Baldwin	Chief Executive Officer, Southern Riverina Irrigators
Mr Ron McCalman	Chief Executive Officer, Murray Irrigation Limited
Mr Laurie Arthur	Chair, SunRice Group
Mr Paul Serra	Chief Executive Officer, SunRice Group
Mr Roger Knight	Executive Officer, Western Murray Land Improvement Group
Mr Trevor Clark	President, Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council Inc

23 July 2025

Griffith Regional Theatre, Burley Griffin Room, Griffith, NSW

Witness	Position and Organisation
Cr George Weston Click or tap here to enter text.	Mayor, Leeton Shire Council
Mrs Jackie Kruger	General Manager, Leeton Shire Council
Cr Ruth McRae	Mayor, Murrumbidgee Council and RAMJO Chair, Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation (RAMJO)
Cr Dallas Tout	Mayor of Wagga Wagga, City of Wagga Wagga
Mr Peter Thompson	City of Wagga Wagga
Cr Doug Curran	Mayor, Griffith City Council
Mr Brett Stonestreet	Interim Executive Officer, Griffith City Council

Cr Shari Blumer	Chair and National President of the MDA and Griffith City Councillor, Murray Darling Association (Region 9)
Mr Justin Sutherland	Non-Executive Member Director, Ricegrowers of Australia, Coleambally Branch, Ricegrowers' Association of Australia Inc
Mr Darren De Bortoli	Managing Director, De Bortoli Wines Pty. Limited
Mr David Farley	Executive Chairman, Matrix Commodities Pty Ltd
Mr John Nikolic	President, Griffith Business Chamber
Mrs Elizabeth Mead	Secretary, Soroptimist International Griffith Inc
Ms Christine Freak	Water Policy Consultant to Murrumbidgee Irrigation and Managing Director, Riviere Consulting Pty Ltd, Murrumbidgee Irrigation
Mr Michael Turnell	General Manager - Legal and Regulatory Services, Murrumbidgee Irrigation
Mr Jeff King	Chair, Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators, Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc
Ms Jennifer McLeod	Policy 7 Communications Manager, Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited
Ms Yvonne Lingua	Executive Officer, Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation (RAMJO)
Professor Fiona Dyer	Member and Past Chair, Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Network
Cr John Harvie	Mayor, Murray River Council

12 August 2025

Menindee Civic Hall, Burley Griffin Room, Menindee, NSW

Witness	Position and Organisation
Mr Richard Unsworth	Regional Engagement Officer, Murray-Darling Basin Authority
Mr Howard Jones OAM	Chairperson, NSW South-West Water Users Association
Mr Harold Bates Jr	Community Member

13 August 2025**Wilcannia Community Hall, Burley Griffin Room, Wilcannia, NSW**

Witness	Position and Organisation
Mr Bill Elliott	President, Wilcannia Tourism Association
Mr Arthur Davies	Member, Wilcannia Tourism Association
Mr Cassidy Kennedy	Chair, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council
Ms Krystle Evans	Senior Project Officer, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council
Mr Justin McClure	Chair, Australian Floodplain Association
Ms Rhonda Hynch	Chair and Barkandji Ranger, Wilcannia Community Working Party

14 August 2025**Broken Hill Civic Centre, Burley Griffin Room, Broken Hill, NSW**

Witness	Position and Organisation
Cr Tom Kennedy	Mayor, Broken Hill City Council
Mr Dan Schulz	PhD Researcher
Mr Terry Smith	Senior Vice President, Pastoralists' Association of West Darling
Mr Rob McBride	Owner, Tolarno Station 1851 Pty Ltd
Mr Luke Driscoll	Chief Executive Officer, Barkandji Native Title Group Aboriginal Corporation
Mr Leroy Johnson	Chair, Barkandji Native Title Group Aboriginal Corporation

09 October 2025**The Crossing Theatre, Exhibition Room, Narrabri, NSW**

Witness	Position and Organisation
Cr Darrell Tiemens	Mayor, Narrabri Shire Council
Mr Dugald Bucknell	Director, Quambone Pastoral Co
Mr Michael Murray	General Manager, Cotton Australia
Mr Mick Coffey	Executive Officer, Namoi Water
Mr Jim Cush	Vice Chair, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association (GVIA)
Mr Cr Brett Nolan	Deputy Mayor, Narrabri Shire Council
Cr Ethan Towns	Councillor, Narrabri Shire Council

Ms Louise Gall	Executive Officer, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association (GVIA)
Mr Michael Seery	Chair, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association (GVIA)
Mr Garry Hall	Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association (MMELA)

10 October 2025**BackOBourke, Exhibition Room, Bourke, NSW**

Witness	Position and Organisation
Mr Ed Fessey	Community Member
Mr Tony Thompson	Irrigator
Mr Frank Old	Irrigator
Cr Lachlan Ford	Councillor, Bourke Shire Council
Mr Jack Sandford	President, Louth Chamber of Commerce
Mr Gary Mooring	Vice President, Louth Chamber of Commerce
Ms Leonie Brown	General Manager, Bourke Shire Council

24 November 2025**Jubilee Room, Parliament House, Exhibition Room, Sydney, NSW**

Witness	Position and Organisation
Professor Long Nghiem	Center Director, Centre for Technology in Water & Wastewater - University of Technology Sydney
Professor Sarah Wheeler	Professor, College of Business, Government and Law
Mr Ian Cole	Executive Officer, Barwon-Darling Water
Ms Karen Hutchinson	Chief Executive Officer, Watertrust Australia
Dr Jonathon Howard PhD	National Parks Association of NSW
Ms Connie Mort	Senior Policy Advisor, NSW Farmers
Mr Richard Bootle	Chair of Water Taskforce
Ms Susannah Tymms	General Manager - Sustainable Dairy
Mr Tom Green	Chair, NSW Irrigators' Council
Dr Madeleine Hartley	CEO

Ms Bobbie Pannowitz	Leeton Business Chamber
Ms Elena Garcia	Convenor, Clean Water for Rivers
Mr Michael Drum	Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre

28 November 2025**Parliament House, Macquarie Room, Sydney, NSW**

Witness	Position and Organisation
Mr Mitchell Isaacs	Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group
Mr Andrew George	Chief Executive Officer
Dr Simon Banks	Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder
Dr Marcus Finn	Branch Head, Environmental Water, Northern Basin and Water Science
Cr John Medcalf OAM	CMA Board Member and Lachlan Shire Council Mayor
Ms Johanna Barnard	Manager, Sumar Produce
Ms Arabella Douglas	CEO, Currie Country Social Change
Mr Phillip Bartolo	Farmer

02 December 2025**Parliament House, Jubilee Room, Sydney, NSW**

Witness	Position and Organisation
Mr Chris Magner	Chairman, Richmond and Wilsons Combined Water Users Association
Mr Paul Shoker	Farmer
Ms Rachel Mackenzie	Chief Executive Officer

Appendix Five – Extracts from minutes

Minutes of meeting no 14

9.04AM, 21 November 2024

Meeting Room 1136 and Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Mr Clancy, Mr Kirby (via Webex), Ms Stuart and Mr Williamson.

Apologies

Ms Kaliyanda.

Officers present

Rohan Tyler, Shanshan Guo, Naomi Parkinson, Yann Pearson and Abegail Turingan.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mrs Quinnell, seconded Mrs Hannan: That the minutes of the meeting of 9 October 2023 be confirmed.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the minutes of the meeting of 17 October 2024, as amended, be confirmed.

2. ***

3. Future inquiry topics

The Committee noted briefing papers on Renewable Energy Zones and regional transport and freight.

The Committee considered future inquiry topics.

Ms Stuart joined the meeting at 9.20am.

Discussion ensued.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That the Committee inquire into and report on the impact of the Federal Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities, with terms of reference to be finalised at a later date.

Mr Clancy left the meeting at 9.37am.

4. Next Meeting

The meeting adjourned at 9.39 am until a time and date to be determined.

Minutes of meeting no 15

2.02PM, 17 February 2025

Meeting Room 1254 and Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair) (in person), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Ms Kaliyanda, Mr Kirby, Ms Stuart (all via videoconference), Mr Clancy and Mr Williamson (both in person).

Apologies

None.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Shanshan Guo, Jerson Balaton, Naomi Parkinson, Oliver Sinclair, Elizabeth Hawken, Abegail Turingan and Tayla Green-Aldridge

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That the minutes of the meeting of 21 November 2024 be confirmed.

2. ***

3. ***

4. Proposed inquiry into the impacts of the Federal Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities

The Committee noted the briefing papers on the Federal Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 prepared by Committee staff.

4.1 Terms of Reference

The Committee considered the draft terms of reference.

Correspondence received from Ms Helen Dalton MP on 17 February 2025 was also considered.

Discussion ensued.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy, seconded by Mr Williamson: That clause (e) of the draft terms of reference be amended to read 'the effectiveness and impacts of past water reforms, including community-based water reduction adjustment programs such as the Strengthening Basin Communities program and the Murray-Darling Basin Economic Development Program'.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Stewart, seconded by Ms Kaliyanda: That the Committee adopt the draft terms of reference, as amended, to inquire into and report on the impacts of the Federal Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities, with particular reference to:

- a. the social, economic and environmental impact of repealing limits to the cap on Commonwealth water purchases
- b. the risks to the effective implementation of the Federal Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 including unlicensed take of water and options to address these risks such as rules for floodplain harvesting
- c. the impact of Planned Environmental Water rules on the reliability of water allocations in NSW and the Commonwealth's environmental water holdings
- d. the impact of rules-based changes on the reliability of water allocations in NSW, including their impact on different water license categories
- e. the effectiveness and impacts of past water reforms, including community-based water reduction adjustment programs such as the Strengthening Basin Communities program and Murray-Darling Basin Economic Development Program
- f. options to improve future community-based reduction adjustment programs including next rounds of the Sustainable Communities Program
- g. any other related matter.

4.2 Submissions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy:

- That the Committee call for submissions and advertise the inquiry on the Committee's webpage
- That the closing day for submissions be 14 April 2025
- That the Chair issue a media release and promotional video announcing the inquiry.

4.3 Stakeholder list

Committee discussed additional stakeholders to contact for the water inquiry.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy:

- That the Committee write to stakeholders listed in Attachment G inviting them to make a written submission by 14 April 2025
- That members circulate any proposed additional stakeholders to the Committee and Committee staff by 4pm, Wednesday 19 February 2025.

4.4 Private briefing

The Committee discussed organising private briefings for the inquiry.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: that the Committee invite relevant key government agencies, academics and experts to provide a private briefing to the Committee about water legislation and key issues relevant to this inquiry.

5. ***

6. Committee workplan

The Committee considered the indicative timeline for the Committee's work program.

Discussion ensued regarding travel scheduling.

The Committee noted that the secretariat will circulate potential dates regarding travel.

7. ***

8. Next Meeting

The meeting adjourned at 2:46pm until a time and date to be determined.

Minutes of meeting no 16

12.12PM, 31 March 2025

Meeting Room 814, Parliament House and Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair) (in person), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Ms Stuart and Mr Clancy (all via videoconference).

Apologies

Mr Williamson, Ms Kaliyanda and Mr Kirby.

Officers present

Leon Last, Jerson Balaton, Naomi Parkinson and Elizabeth Hawken.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Stuart, seconded by Mr Clancy: That the minutes of the meeting of 17 February 2025 be confirmed.

2. ***

3. ***

4. ***

5. Next Meeting

The meeting adjourned at 2.18pm until 10 April 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 17

1.04PM, 10 April 2025

Meeting Room 1254, Parliament House and Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Mr Clancy (Webex), Mr Kirby (Webex) and Ms Stuart (Webex).

Apologies

Ms Kaliyanda and Mr Williamson.

Officers present

Rohan Tyler, Jerson Balaton, Naomi Parkinson, Elizabeth Hawken and Abegail Turingan.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the minutes of the meeting of 31 March 2025 be confirmed.

2. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following correspondence received:

The Miller's Forest Drainage Union, dated 26 March 2025, informing the Committee that they will not be making a submission to the inquiry.

3. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities

3.1 Submissions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali, seconded by Mr Kirby: That the Committee grant extensions of up to one month (14 May 2025), upon request, to the 14 April 2025 submissions deadline, including to the following organisations and individuals:

- Leeton Shire Council
- Nature Conservation Council
- Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association
- Justine Bucknell
- Dugald Bucknell
- Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.

3.2 ***

4. ***

5. Next Meeting

The meeting adjourned at 3.57 until a time and date to be determined.

Minutes of meeting no 18

2.33PM, 16 May 2025

Meeting Room 1254, and Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair) (in person), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Ms Kaliyanda, Mr Kirby, Ms Stuart, Mr Clancy and Mr Williamson (all via videoconference).

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Elizabeth Hawken and Abegail Turingan.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the minutes of the meeting of 10 April 2025 be confirmed.

2. ***

3. Inquiry into the impacts of the Federal Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities

3.1 Correspondence

The Committee noted the following correspondence received:

- Central Murray Environmental Floodplains Group, dated 11 April 2025, requesting an extension for their submission to the inquiry.
- SunRice Group, dated 11 April 2025, requesting an extension for their submission to the inquiry.
- Watertrust Australia, dated 14 April 2025, requesting an extension for their submission to the inquiry.
- Murray-Darling Basin Authority, dated 24 April 2025, informing the Committee that they will not be making a submission to the inquiry.

3.2 Submissions

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Stuart:

- That the Committee publish submissions numbered 1-2, 4-8, 10-12, 15-17, 19-45, 47-57, 60-63, 66-101 in full (with contact details and signatures redacted).
- That the submissions numbered 3, 9, 13, 14,18, 46, 58 and 59 remain confidential to the Committee and not be published.
- That the links to personal google drives on pages 8 and 10-11 of submission 64; and page 23 of submission 65 be redacted.
- That the interim report of the Citizen's inquiry into health impacts of coal-fired power stations, dated August 2024, attached to submission 30 be redacted.

Ms Kaliyanda joined the meeting at 2:36pm.

The Committee noted correspondence received from Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, dated 16 April 2025 requesting that the Committee accept a video submission to the inquiry, in addition to their written submission.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson:

- That the video received from Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators not be accepted as a submission to the inquiry.
- That the Committee authorises the Chair to write to Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators to inform them that video submissions

cannot be accepted. However, they can provide an additional written submission if they would like to contribute further to the inquiry.

3.3 Regional hearings and site visits – Southern Basin

The Committee considered the draft site visit schedule and hearing schedule.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Stuart:

- That the Committee seek funding approval to undertake regional hearings and site inspections in the Southern Basin in June 2025.
- That the Committee authorises the Chair and secretariat to make arrangements for the regional hearings and site inspections in the Southern Basin.
- That the Committee invite witnesses listed at Attachment E to give evidence at public hearings in the Southern Basin in June 2025.
- That any Member circulate to the Committee and the secretariat any proposed additional stakeholders by Wednesday, 21 May at 2pm.

3.4 Regional hearings and site visits

The Committee discussed potential dates for further site visits and regional hearings.

Resolved on the motion of Mr Bali, seconded by Ms Kaliyanda:

- That the Committee seek funding approval to undertake regional hearings and site inspections in the north and west of the Murray-Darling Basin in July and August.
- That the Committee authorises the Chair and secretariat to make arrangements for the regional hearings and site inspections in the north and west of the Murray-Darling Basin in July and August.

Mr Kirby joined the meeting at 2:41pm.

4. ***

5. Next Meeting

The meeting adjourned at 2:45pm until a time and date to be determined.

Minutes of meeting no 19

9.27AM, 22 July 2025

Deniliquin Town Hall

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Ms Kaliyanda, Mr Clancy and Mr Kirby.

Apologies

Ms Stuart and Mr Williamson.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Naomi Parkinson, Alex Read, and Abigail Turingan.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the minutes of the meeting of 16 May 2025 be confirmed.

2. ***

3. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities Pre-hearing deliberative meeting

3.1 Regional hearings and site visits

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Kaliyanda: That the Committee approves undertaking regional hearings and site inspections in the southern Basin in July 2025.

3.2 Correspondence

The Committee noted correspondence sent to:

- Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators, dated 16 May 2025, regarding their additional submission to the inquiry.
The Committee noted correspondence received from:
- The Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, dated 22 May 2025, advising the Committee that they will not be making a submission to the inquiry.
- Albury Business Connect, dated 30 May 2025, informing the Committee that they will be unable to attend the public hearing due to a lack of available staff.
- Fivebough and Tuckerbil Wetlands Advisory Committee, dated 10 June 2025, withdrawing their attendance as a witness at the public hearing.
- NSW Irrigators' Council, dated 18 June 2025, informing the Committee that they will be unable to attend the rescheduled hearings in Deniliquin and Griffith, and asking to attend a hearing at Parliament House at a later date.
- Anna Wilson, from Murrumbidgee Water Environmental Group, dated 18 June 2025, informing the Committee that she will be unable to attend the rescheduled public hearing in Griffith.
- Sumar Produce, dated 21 June 2025, informing the Committee that they will not be able to attend the rescheduled public hearing date.
- NSW Farmers, dated 11 June 2025, providing the Committee with a link to a publicly available report from Dairy Australia titled Impact of Water Buyback on the SMDB Dairy Industry.
- Murray Regional Strategy Group, dated 21 June 2025, informing the Committee that they will not be able to attend the rescheduled public hearing date.
- David Duncan, from Sustainable Soil Management, received 8 July 2025, advising the Committee to disregard the data contained in a recently published CSIRO study.
- Leeton & District Local Aboriginal Land Council, received 17 July 2025, withdrawing their attendance as a witness at the public hearing due to unexpected circumstances.

- Matrix Commodities, dated 10 June 2025, providing the Committee with a late submission to the inquiry.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee accept the submission from Matrix Commodities as submission number 102, and publish this on its website with contact details redacted.

- Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, dated 25 June 2025, asking the Committee to reconsider accepting their video submission.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee authorises the Chair to write to Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc, noting that the video has been accepted as correspondence and circulated to members.

3.3 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Tuesday, 22 July 2025, to give evidence in relation to the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

3.4 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 22 July 2025, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.

3.5 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby:

- That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:
 - o Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Tuesday, 29 July 2025;
 - o Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Thursday, 31 July 2025
- That witnesses be requested to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

The Committee adjourned the pre-hearing deliberative meeting at 9.35am.

3.6 Public hearing

The public hearing commenced at 10.02am. Witnesses appeared in person and via videoconference. The Chair opened the public hearing and acknowledged the Welcome to Country delivered by Sacha Free. The Chair made a short opening statement.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Councillor Ashely Hall, Mayor, Edward River Council, was sworn and examined.
- Jack Bond, Chief Executive Officer, Edward River Council, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Robert Brown, Family Business Consultant, Peppin Family Consulting, from the Deniliquin Business Chamber, was affirmed and examined.
- Robbie Sefton, Founder, Sefton & Associates Pty Ltd, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Sophie Baldwin, Chief Executive Officer, Southern Riverina Irrigators, was affirmed and examined.
- Ron McCalman, Chief Executive Officer, Murray Irrigation Limited, was sworn and examined.
- Laurie Arthur, Chair, SunRice Group, was affirmed and examined.
- Paul Serra, Chief Executive Officer, SunRice Group, appearing via videoconference, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The Committee adjourned at 12.28pm and resumed at 1.23pm.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Roger Knight, Executive Officer, Western Murray Land Improvement Group, was sworn and examined.
- Trevor Clark, President, Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The Committee adjourned at 2.03pm and resumed at 2.29pm.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Sacha Free, from Deniliquin Local Aboriginal Land Council, was affirmed and examined.

- Jenny Crew, Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre, appearing via teleconference, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 2.59pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

The Chair resumed the deliberative meeting at 3.30pm.

3.7 Publishing transcript of evidence

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee authorise the secretariat to explore seeking the recording of the public hearing for Hansard transcription purposes, but only in the event that technical difficulties prevented Hansard from transcribing a portion of the hearing.

3.8 Accepting and publishing tendered documents

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Kaliyanda: That the Committee accept and publish the following documents:

- Opening statement, from the Western Murray Land Improvement Group, tendered by Roger Knight.

4. Next Meeting

The meeting adjourned at 3.32pm, until 8.30am, 23 July 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 20

8.37AM, 23 July 2025

Burley Griffin Room, Griffith Regional Theatre

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Ms Kaliyanda, Mr Clancy and Mr Kirby.

Apologies

Ms Stewart and Mr Williamson.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Damon Goolagong, Naomi Parkinson, Alex Read, and Abigail Turingan.

AGENDA ITEM

- 1. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities**
Pre-hearing deliberative meeting

1.1 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Wednesday, 23 July 2025 to give evidence in relation to the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

1.2 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Kaliyanda:

- That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 23 July 2025, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.
- That the Committee authorise media organisations to record the hearing.

1.3 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby:

- That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:
 - o Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Tuesday, 29 July 2025;
 - o Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Thursday, 31 July 2025;
- That witnesses be required to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

The Committee adjourned the pre-hearing deliberative meeting at 8.40am.

1.4 Public hearing

The public hearing commenced at 9.00am. Witnesses appeared in person and via videoconference. The Chair opened the public hearing following the Acknowledgement of Country by Damon Goolagong. The Chair made a short opening statement.

The following witness was admitted:

- Professor Fiona Dyer, Member and Past Chair Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Network, appearing via videoconference, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Councillor George Weston, Mayor, Leeton Shire Council, was sworn and examined.

- Jackie Kruger, General Manager, Leeton Shire Council, was sworn and examined.
- Yvonne Lingua, Executive Officer, Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation, was affirmed and examined.
- Councillor Ruth McRea, Mayor, Murrumbidgee Council and Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation Chair, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Councillor Doug Curran, Mayor, Griffith City Council, was sworn and examined.
- Brett Stonestreet, General Manager, Griffith City Council, was sworn and examined.
- Councillor Shari Blumer, Chair and National President of the Murray Darling Association and Griffith City Councillor, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The Committee adjourned at 11.00am and resumed at 11.20am.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Justin Sutherland, Non-Executive Member Director, Coleambally Branch, Ricegrowers' Association of Australia, was affirmed and examined.
- Darren De Bortoli, Managing Director, De Bortoli Wines Pty Limited, was sworn and examined.
- David Farley, Executive Chairman, Matrix Commodities Pty Ltd, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- John Nikolic, President Griffith Business Chamber, was affirmed and examined.
- Elizabeth Mead, Secretary Soroptimist International Griffith Inc, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The Committee adjourned for lunch, and resumed at 1.35pm.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Christine Freak, Water Policy Consultant to Murrumbidgee Irrigation and Managing Director, Riviere Consulting Pty Ltd, was affirmed and examined.
- Michael Turnell, General Manager, Legal and Regulatory Services, Murrumbidgee Irrigation, was sworn and examined.
- Jeff King, Chair, Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators and Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc, was affirmed and examined.

- Jenny McLeod, Policy 7 Communications Manager, Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Councillor Dallas Tout, Mayor of Wagga Wagga, city of Wagga Wagga, was sworn and examined.
- Peter Thompson, General Manager, City of Wagga Wagga, was affirmed and examined.
- Councillor John Harvie, Mayor Murray River Council, was sworn and examined.

The public hearing concluded at 2.56pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

The Chair resumed the deliberative meeting at 2.58pm.

1.5 Publishing transcript of evidence

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

1.6 Accepting and publishing tendered documents

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee accept the following documents:

- Anne Jensen (et al), River Murray Barrages Environmental Flows: An evaluation of environmental flow needs in the Lower Lakes and Coorong, Department for Environmental Heritage and Aboriginal Affairs – Government of South Australia
- Map – changing wetlands from Pre-European to 2016
- Darren De Bortli, "Water politics – the friction of fact versus fiction," Grapegrower & Winemaker, March 2020, issue 674, pp 17-18
- Conference presentation: Rob England, "The Friction of Fact versus Fiction," International Salinity Conference 2008.

1.7 Regional public hearings and site inspections

The Committee considered plans for regional public hearings and site inspections in August and October, following the postponing of the southern Basin regional hearing from June to July.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee:

- Seek funding approval to undertake regional hearings and site inspections in the north and west of the Murray-Darling Basin in August and October 2025.
- Authorises the Chair and secretariat to make arrangements for the regional hearings and site inspections in the north and west of the Murray-Darling Basin in August and October 2025.

1.8 ***

2. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 3.01pm until a date and time to be determined.

Minutes of meeting no 21

1.46PM, 12 August 2025

Menindee Civic Hall and via Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Ms Kaliyanda (via videoconference), Mr Williamson, Mr Clancy and Mr Kirby.

Apologies

Ms Stuart.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Alex Read, Art Bae and Elizabeth Hawken.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That the minutes of the meetings of 22 and 23 July 2025 be confirmed.

2. ***

3. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities

Pre-hearing deliberative meeting

3.1 Correspondence

Sent:

The Committee noted the following correspondence sent:

Letter, sent to Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators, dated 5 August 2025, regarding their additional submission to the inquiry.

Received:

The Committee noted the following correspondence received:

- Two emails, from Stephen McGrath, both dated 23 July 2025, regarding environmental outcomes in the Murray Darling Basin.
- Email, from Sumar Produce, dated 25 July 2025, expressing their interest in appearing at a future public hearing.

- Email, from Deniliquin Business Chamber, dated 28 July 2025, providing the Committee with a copy of Rob Brown's opening statement from the public hearing on 22 July 2025.
- Eight emails, from Western Murray Land Improvement Group, dated 28 and 29 July 2025, providing further information about their projects, as well as information and community feedback for community engagement on Murray-Darling Basin policy.
- Email, from Edward River Council, dated 30 July 2025, attaching their opening statements and their proposal to reform the Sustainable Communities funding program.
- Email, from Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council Inc, dated 5 August 2025, with five documents attached, providing additional information regarding carp.

3.2 Clarification of transcript evidence

- The Committee noted correspondence received from Matrix Commodities, dated 4 August 2025, clarifying evidence given at the public hearing on 23 July 2025.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee publishes the correspondence received from Matrix Commodities (with signature redacted), and adds a link to the correspondence at the relevant point in the transcript for the public hearing of 23 July 2025.

- The Committee noted correspondence received from Western Murray Land Improvement Group, dated 5 August 2025, regarding evidence given at the public hearing on 22 July 2025.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee publishes the correspondence received from Western Murray Land Improvement Group, and adds a link to the correspondence at the relevant point in the transcript for the public hearing of 22 July 2025.

3.3 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Tuesday, 12 August 2025, to give evidence in relation to the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

3.4 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 12 August 2025 by Committee staff and media organisations, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.

3.5 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

- Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:
 - o Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Wednesday, 20 August 2025;
 - o Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Friday, 22 August 2025;
- That witnesses be requested to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

The Chair adjourned the pre-hearing deliberative meeting at 1.51pm.

3.6 Public hearing

The public hearing commenced at 2.01pm.

Witnesses appeared in person and via videoconference. The Chair opened the public hearing following a Welcome to Country by Dorothy Stephens. The Chair made a short opening statement.

The following witness was admitted:

- Howard Jones OAM, Chairman, NSW South-West Water Users Association, via videoconference, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Richard Unsworth, Community Member, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Harold Bates Jr, Community Member, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 3.45pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

The Chair resumed the post-hearing deliberative meeting at 3.46pm.

3.7 Publishing transcript of evidence

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

4. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 3.47pm until 12.45pm, Wednesday, 13 August 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 22

12.44PM, 13 August 2025

Wilcannia Community Hall and via Videoconference

Members present.

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Ms Kaliyanda (via videoconference), Mr Williamson, Mr Clancy and Mr Kirby.

Apologies

Ms Stuart.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Alex Read, Art Bae and Elizabeth Hawken.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities Pre-hearing deliberative meeting

1.1 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Wednesday, 13 August 2025, to give evidence in relation to the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

1.2 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 13 August 2025, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.

1.3 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson:

- That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:
 - o Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Wednesday, 20 August 2025;

- o Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Friday, 22 August 2025;
- That witnesses be requested to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

1.4 Public hearing

The public hearing commenced at 1.04pm.

Witnesses appeared in person. The Chair opened the public hearing following a Welcome to Country by Rhonda Hynch. The Chair made a short opening statement.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Bill Elliot, President, Wilcannia Tourism Association, was affirmed and examined.
- Arthur Davies, Member, Wilcannia Tourism Association, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Cassidy Kennedy, Chair, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, was affirmed and examined.
- Krystle Evans, Senior Project Officer, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Rhonda Hynch, Wilcannia Community Working Part and Barkandji Ranger, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witnesses was admitted:

- Justin McClure, Chair, Australian Floodplain Association, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 3.20pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

The Chair resumed the deliberative meeting at 3.33pm.

1.5 Publishing transcript of evidence

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Charisma: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

2. ***

3. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 3.35pm until 8.45am, Thursday, 14 August 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 23

8.43AM, 14 August 2025

Broken Hill Civic Centre

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Mr Clancy, Mr Williamson and Mr Kirby.

Apologies

Ms Stuart and Ms Kaliyanda.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Alex Read, Art Bae and Elizabeth Hawken.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities Pre-hearing deliberative meeting

1.1 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Thursday, 14 August 2025, to give evidence in relation to the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

1.2 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 14 August 2025, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.

1.3 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali:

- That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:

- o Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Wednesday, 20 August 2025;
- o Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Friday, 22 August 2025;
- That witnesses be requested to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

Meeting adjourned at 8.45am.

1.4 Public hearing

The public hearing commenced at 8.51am.

Witnesses appeared in person. The Chair opened the public hearing and made a short opening statement.

The following witness was admitted:

- Councillor Tom Kennedy, Mayor, Broken Hill City Council, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Terry Smith, Senior Vice President, Pastoralists' Association of West Darling, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The Committee adjourned for a short deliberative meeting.

Mid hearing deliberative meeting

The Chair resumed the deliberative meeting at 10.55am.

1.5 Submission

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy:

- That the Committee accept the submission provided by Dan Schulz with the secretariat to circulate an electronic copy once received.

1.6 Regional hearings and site visits – Northern Basin

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby:

- That the Committee authorise the Chair and secretariat to investigate and seek quotes for charter flight options for the Committee's travel to Narrabri and Bourke in October 2025.

The meeting adjourned at 10.58am for a short break.

1.7 Public hearing

The Chair resumed the public hearing at 11.31am.

The following witness was admitted:

- Dan Schulz, PhD Researcher, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Leroy Johnson, Chair, Barkandji Native Title Aboriginal Corporation Registered Native Title Body Corporate (RNTBC), was affirmed and examined.
- Luke Driscoll, CEO, Barkandji Native Title Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Rob McBride, Tolarno Station 1851 Pty Ltd, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 12.46pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

The Chair resumed the deliberative meeting at 12.53pm.

1.8 Publishing transcript of evidence

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

1.9 Accepting and publishing tendered documents

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee accept and publish the following documents:

- Document from Rob McBride 'Statement to the Inquiry into the Impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on Regional Communities.

2. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 12.55pm until a date and time to be determined.

Minutes of meeting no 24

12.30PM, 8 September 2025

Room 813a, Parliament House and via Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Williamson (both in person), Mr Kirby, Ms Kaliyanda, Ms Stuart and Mr Clancy (all via videoconference).

Apologies

Mr Bali (Deputy Chair).

Officers present

Kieran Lewis (via videoconference), Jerson Balaton, Naomi Parkinson and Elizabeth Hawken.

AGENDA ITEM

3. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the minutes of the meetings of 12, 13 and 14 August be confirmed.

4. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities – Northern Basin Public Hearings

4.1 Travel to the Northern basin

The Committee considered the potential costs and modes of transport for travel to the northern Basin for the purposes of conducting public hearings in Bourke and Narrabri.

Discussion ensued.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee:

- charter a flight from Sydney to Narrabri, Narrabri to Bourke, and Bourke to Sydney on 9 and 10 October,
- ***
- ***

4.2 On-site efficiency of irrigated agriculture

Mr Kirby raised the matter of on-site efficiency measures used in irrigated agriculture.

Discussion ensued.

5. Next Meeting

The meeting adjourned at 12.51pm until 3.30pm, 25 September 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 25

3.32PM, 25 September 2025

Room 1043, Parliament House and via Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Mr Kirby, and Ms Stuart (all via videoconference).

Apologies

Mr Clancy and Ms Kaliyanda.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Elizabeth Hawken and Art Bae.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Stuart: That the minutes of the meeting of 8 September 2025 be confirmed.

2. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities

2.1 Correspondence

The Committee noted the following correspondence received:

- Western Riverina Community College, dated 29 July 2025, attaching a submission from Frances Pietroboni, for the Committee's consideration.

2.2 Publication of submissions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali:

- That the Committee publish submissions numbered 103, 104 and 106 in full.
- That the Committee publish submission number 105, with redactions as follows:
 - o pages 26-39 removed and replaced with a page stating "pages 26-39 have been kept confidential,"
 - o page 40 redacted until the beginning of "section g.ii".

2.3 Publication of questions on notice and supplementary questions received following the public hearings of 22 and 23 July 2025

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Stuart: That the Committee:

- accept the responses to questions taken on notice at the public hearings of 22 and 23 July 2025 and answers to supplementary questions,
- publish the responses from the following on the Committee's website with signatures and contact details redacted:
 - o Deniliquin Business Chamber
 - o Edward River Council
 - o Yanco Creek and Tributaries Advisory Council
 - o Southern Riverina Irrigators
 - o Murrumbidgee Irrigation

- o Murrumbidgee Council
- o Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation
- o Griffith City Council
- o Murrumbidgee Groundwater Inc and Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators Inc
- o Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation
- o Leeton Shire Council
- o Ricegrowers' Association of Australia
- o Coleambally Irrigation Co-operative Limited
- ***.

2.4 Terms of Reference

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee amend its terms of reference for the inquiry into the impacts of the of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities, by inserting:

- g) other NSW water reforms impacting water allocations and landholder rights, including harvestable rights

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That members circulate any proposed additional stakeholders to the Committee and Committee staff by 4pm, Thursday 2 October 2025.

2.5 Referral of Water Management Amendment (Intergovernmental Agreements) Bill 2025

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Stuart: That the terms of reference for the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities be amended, by inserting:

- h) the provisions of the Water Management Amendment (Intergovernmental Agreements) Bill 2025

2.6 Submissions and stakeholder list

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali:

- That the Committee write to stakeholders who have previously engaged with the inquiry, inviting them to make a written submission by Thursday 6 November 2025.
- That members circulate any proposed additional stakeholders to the Committee and Committee staff by 4pm, Monday 29 September 2025.

3. ***

4. Next Meeting

The meeting adjourned at 3.52 pm until 12.20 pm, 9 October 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 26

12.28PM, 9 October 2025

The Crossing Theatre, Narrabri

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Mr Clancy, Mr Williamson (via videoconference) and Mr Kirby.

Apologies

Mr Clancy and Ms Kaliyanda.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Alex Read, Ashley Kim and Art Bae.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the minutes of the meeting of 25 September 2025 be confirmed.

2. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities
Pre-hearing deliberative meeting

2.1 Inquiry correspondence

Received:

The Committee noted the following correspondence received from:

- Brett McInnes, General Manager, Inverell Shire Council, dated 20 September 2025, informing the Committee that Inverell Shire Council is unable to participate in the public hearing.
- Sarah Carr, Director North West, Conservation Programs, Heritage and Regulation, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, dated 1 October 2025, advising that the Macquarie, Gwydir, Barwon-Darling and Namoi Peel EWAGs are not in a position to give evidence at the public hearing.
- Mick Coffey, Executive Officer, Namoi Water, dated 7 October 2025, providing videos titled 'Saving Wee Waa'.

2.2 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Thursday, 9 October 2025, to give evidence in relation to

the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

2.3 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 9 October 2025 by Committee staff and media organisations, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.

2.4 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby:

- That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:
 - o Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Wednesday, 15 October 2025;
 - o Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Friday, 17 October 2025.
- That witnesses be requested to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

2.5 Public hearing

The public hearing commenced at 12.31PM.

Witnesses appeared in person. The Chair opened the public hearing and made a short opening statement.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Councillor Ethan Towns, Narrabri Shire Council, was sworn and examined.
- Councillor Brett Nolan, Deputy Mayor, Narrabri Shire Council, was sworn and examined.
- Councillor Darrell Tiemens, Mayor, Narrabri Shire Council, was sworn and examined.

Mr Williamson left the meeting at 1.02pm.

Evidence concluded and witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Dugald Bucknell, Director, Quambone Pastoral Co, was sworn and examined.
- Garry Hall, President, Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and witnesses withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Michael Murray, General Manager, Cotton Australia, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The Committee adjourned for a short break at 2.36pm.

The Committee resumed the hearing at 3.16pm.

The following witness was admitted:

- Mick Coffey, Executive Officer, Namoi Water, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Jim Cush, Vice Chair, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, was affirmed and examined.
- Louise Gall, Executive Officer, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association was affirmed and examined.
- Michael Seery, Chair, Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 4.45pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

The Chair resumed the deliberative meeting at 5.08pm.

2.6 Publishing transcript of evidence

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

2.7 Accepting and publishing tendered documents

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee accept the following documents:

- Opening statement from Narrabri Shire Council.
- Graphs with Murray Darling Basin water volume data in the Murray Darling Basin, from Cotton Australia.
- Opening statement from Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association.

3. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 5.09pm until 12.20pm, Friday, 10 October 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 27

12.29PM, 10 October 2025

Back O' Bourke Information and Exhibition Centre, Bourke

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Mr Clancy and Mr Kirby.

Apologies

Ms Stuart, Ms Kaliyanda and Mr Williamson.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Alex Read, Ashley Kim and Art Bae.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities
Pre-hearing deliberative meeting

1.1 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Friday, 10 October 2025, to give evidence in relation to the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

1.2 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 10 October 2025 by Committee staff and media organisations, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.

1.3 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:

- o Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Wednesday, 15 October 2025;
- o Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Friday, 17 October 2025.
- That witnesses be requested to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

Meeting adjourned at 12.32pm

1.4 Public hearing

The public hearing commenced at 12.38pm.

Witnesses appeared in person. The Chair opened the public hearing and made a short opening statement.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Councillor Lachlan Ford, Mayor, Burke Shire Council, was sworn and examined.
- Leonie Brown, General Manager, Bourke Shire Council, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Jack Sanford, President, Louth Chamber of Commerce, was sworn and examined.
- Gary Mooring, Vice President, Louth Chamber of Commerce, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The Committee adjourned for a short break at 1.59pm and returned at 2.13pm.

The following witness was admitted:

- Ed Fessey, Livestock producer and floodplain grazer, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and witness withdrew.

The Committee adjourned for a break at 2.40pm and returned at 2.56pm.

The following witness was admitted:

- Tony Thompson, Irrigator, Community Member, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Frank Old, Retired Irrigator, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The public hearing concluded at 4.02pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

The Chair resumed the deliberative meeting at 4.13pm.

1.5 Publishing transcript of evidence

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

1.6 Accepting and publishing tendered documents

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee accept the following documents:

- Opening statement from Bourke Shire Council

1.7 Media interview

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee authorise Mr Clancy, to conduct a media interview on the regional hearings in Narrabri and Bourke as the Chair is unavailable.

2. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 4.21pm until 9.00am, Monday, 24 November 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 28

9.24AM, 24 November 2025

Jubilee Room, Parliament House

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair) (both in person), Mr Clancy, Ms Kaliyanda and Mr Kirby (all via videoconference).

Apologies

Ms Stuart and Mr Williamson.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Alex Read, Naomi Parkinson and Art Bae.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the minutes of the meeting of 9 and 10 October 2025 be confirmed.

2. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities

Pre-hearing deliberative meeting

2.1 Inquiry correspondence

The Committee noted the following correspondence received from:

- Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association Inc, dated 3 November 2025, regarding the Committee's regional hearing in Narrabri.
- Country Women's Association of NSW, dated 11 November 2025, informing the Committee that they cannot attend the public hearing on 28 November 2025.
- Inverell Shire Council, dated 12 November 2025, informing the Committee that they cannot attend the public hearing on 28 November 2025.

- Water for the Environment, Conservation Programs, Heritage and Regulation Group, from the NSW Department of Energy, the Environment and Water, informing the Committee that the Murrumbidgee EWAG will not be appearing as a witness at the public hearing on 28 November 2025.
- Mid-Western Council, dated 14 November 2025, informing the Committee that they will be unable to attend the public hearing on 28 November 2025.

2.2 Supplementary submission

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That submission number 107 remain confidential to the Committee and not be published.

2.3 Documents tendered at the last public hearing

The Committee noted the following documents tendered and accepted at the public hearings on 9 and 10 October 2025.

- Narrabri Shire Council, opening statement, received 9 October 2025
- Gwydir Valley Irrigators Association, opening statement, received 9 October 2025
- Cotton Australia, graphs, received 10 October 2025
- Bourke Shire Council, opening statement, received 10 October 2025.

2.4 Publication of responses to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions

The Committee considered publishing responses to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions from the public hearings on 12 August 2025, 14 August 2025, 9 October 2025 and 10 October 2025.

Stakeholder	Date received
Richard Unsworth	24 October 2025

Supplementary questions, 14 August 2025

Stakeholder	Date received
Dan Schultz	21 October 2025

Questions taken on notice, 9 October 2025

Stakeholder	Date received
Namoi Water	21 October 2025

Supplementary questions, 9 October 2025

Stakeholder	Date received
Namoi Water	13 November 2025
Cotton Australia	13 November 2025

Questions taken on notice, 10 October 2025

Stakeholder	Date received
Bourke Shire Council	4 November 2025

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Kaliyanda: That the Committee accept the responses to questions taken on notice at the public hearings of 12 August 2025, 14 August 2025, 9 October 2025 and 10 October 2025, and answers to supplementary questions, as listed in the agenda, and publish these on the Committee's website with signatures and contact details redacted.

2.5 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Monday, 24 November 2025, to give evidence in relation to the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

2.6 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 24 November 2025 by Committee staff and media organisations, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.

2.7 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Kaliyanda: That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:

- Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Monday, 8 December 2025;
- Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Wednesday, 10 December 2025.
- That witnesses be requested to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

The pre-hearing deliberative adjourned at 9.32 am.

2.8 Public hearing

The Chair opened the public hearing at 9.36 am and made a short opening statement.

Mr Clancy joined the meeting at 9.47am.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Ms Elena Garcia, Convenor, Clean Water for Rivers, appearing via videoconference, was affirmed and examined.
- Dr Jonathan Howard, Vice President, National Parks Association of NSW, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Professor Long Nghiem, Centre Director, Centre for Technology in Water and Wastewater, University of Technology Sydney, appearing via videoconference, was affirmed and examined.
- Sarah Wheeler, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The Committee adjourned at 11.15 am and returned at 12.01 pm.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Ms Connie Mort, Senior Policy advisor, NSW Farmers, was affirmed and examined.
- Mr Richard Bootle, Chair Water Taskforce, NSW Farmers, was affirmed and examined.
- Ms Susannah Tymms, General Manager, Sustainable Diary, Diary Australia, appearing via videoconference, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Mr Tom Green, Chair, NSW Irrigators' Council, was affirmed and examined.
- Dr Madeleine Hartley, CEO, NSW Irrigators' Council, affirmed and examined.
- Mr Ian Cole, Barwon-Darling Water, appearing via videoconference, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The Committee adjourned at 1.31 pm and returned at 2.15 pm.

The following witness was admitted:

- Ms Karen Hutchinson, Chief Executive Officer, Watertrust Australia, appearing via videoconference, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Ms Bobbie Pannowitz, President, Leeton Business Chamber, appearing via videoconference, was affirmed and examined.
- Mr Michael Drum, Executive Officer, Macquarie River Food and Fibre, appearing via videoconference, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The hearing concluded at 3.24 pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

2.9 Publishing transcript of evidence

The meeting resumed at 3.24 pm.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

2.10 Accepting and publishing tendered documents

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee accept the following document:

- Opening statement from NSW Irrigators' Council.

2.11 Committee travel

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee undertakes a public hearing in Coffs Harbour in December 2025.

3. ***

4. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 3.28 pm until 8.50am, Friday, 28 November 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 29

8.58AM, 28 November 2025

Macquarie Room, Parliament House and Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Mr Clancy, Ms Kaliyanda and Mr Kirby (via videoconference in the afternoon).

Apologies

Mr Williamson and Ms Stuart.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Alex Read, Naomi Parkinson, Art Bae and Nicolle Gill.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the minutes of the meeting of 24 November 2025 be confirmed.

2. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities Pre-hearing deliberative meeting

2.1 Inquiry correspondence

The Committee considered the following correspondence received from:

- Environmental Defenders Office, dated 17 November 2025, informing the Committee that they will not be able to attend the public hearing on 28 November 2025.
- Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, dated 18 November 2025, informing the Committee that they will not be attending the public hearing on 28 November 2025.
- Murray Darling Basin Authority, dated 18 November 2025, informing the Committee that they will not be attending the public hearing on 28 November 2025.
- The NSW Aboriginal Land Council, dated 20 November 2025, informing the Committee that they will not be able to attend the hearing on 28 November 2025, but that they are happy to answer any additional questions in writing.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy, seconded by Ms Kaliyanda: That the Committee agrees to send supplementary questions to the Environmental Defenders Office, the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, the Murray Darling Basin Authority and the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, and adopts the following process for the questions:

- Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for the above organisations to Committee staff by 4pm, Monday, 8 December 2025;
- Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Wednesday, 10 December 2025;
- That the above organisations be requested to return answers to supplementary questions within 4 weeks of receipt.

2.2 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Friday, 28 November 2025, to give evidence in relation to the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

2.3 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 28 November 2025 by Committee staff and media organisations, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.

2.4 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Kaliyanda:

- That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:
 - o Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Monday, 8 December 2025;

- o Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Wednesday, 10 December 2025.
- o That witnesses be requested to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

2.5 Public hearing planning

The Committee considered plans for a public hearing in December.

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Kaliyanda: That the Committee not hold a public hearing in Coffs Harbour on 2 December, and will invite the confirmed witnesses to appear at a public hearing at Parliament House.

The meeting adjourned at 9.05 am.

2.6 Public hearing

The Chair opened the public hearing at 9.06 am and made a short opening statement.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Mr Mitchell Isaacs, Executive Director, Water Knowledge Division, Water Group, DCCEEW, was affirmed and examined.
- Mr Andrew George, Chief Executive Officer, WaterNSW, was affirmed and examined.
- Evidence concluded and witnesses withdrew.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Dr Simon Banks, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder, was affirmed and examined.
- Mr Marcus Finn, Branch Head, Environmental Water, Northern Basin and Water Science, Department of Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water, was affirmed and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The Committee adjourned at 10.19am and returned at 2.07pm.

The following witnesses were admitted:

- Ms Johanna Barnard, Manager, Sumar Produce, appearing videoconference, was sworn and examined.
- Councillor John Medcalf, Country Mayors Association Member and Lachlan Shire Council Mayor, appearing via videoconference, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witnesses withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Ms Arabella Douglas, Chief Executive Officer, Currie Country Social Change, appearing via videoconference, was sworn and examined.

Ms Kaliyanda rejoined the meeting at 2.45pm.

Mr Clancy rejoined the meeting at 3.05pm.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Mr Phillip Bartolo, appearing via videoconference, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The hearing concluded at 3.34pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

2.7 Publication of transcript of evidence

The meeting resumed at 3.34pm.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Clancy: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

3. ***

4. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 3.35pm until 2.00pm, Tuesday, 2 December 2025.

Minutes of meeting no 30

1.52PM, 2 December 2025

Jubilee Room, Parliament House and Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair) (in person), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair) (via videoconference), Mr Kirby (in person), Mr Williamson, Mr Clancy and Ms Kaliyanda (all via videoconference).

Apologies

Ms Stuart.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Alex Read, Naomi Parkinson, Art Bae and Nicolle Gill.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the minutes of the meeting of 28 November 2025 be confirmed.

2. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities

2.1 Inquiry correspondence

The Committee noted the following correspondence received from:

- City of Coffs Harbour, dated 26 November 2025, informing the Committee that they will be unable to attend the public hearing on 2 December 2025.
- Clarence Environment Centre, dated 28 November 2025, informing the Committee that they are unable to attend the public hearing on 2 December 2025.

2.2 Public hearing witnesses

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That the Committee invites the witnesses listed in the notice of public hearing for Tuesday, 2 December 2025, to give evidence in relation to the inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities.

2.3 Media orders for public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That the Committee authorise the audio-visual recording, photography and broadcasting of the public hearing on 2 December 2025 by Committee staff and media organisations, in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's resolution of 9 May 2023; and the Assembly's guidelines for coverage of proceedings for parliamentary committees administered by the Legislative Assembly.

2.4 Answers to questions on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali:

- That the Committee adopts the following process in relation to supplementary questions:
 - o Members to email any proposed supplementary questions for witnesses to Committee staff by 4pm, Monday, 8 December 2025;
 - o Secretariat to then circulate all proposed supplementary questions to the Committee, with members to lodge any objections to the questions by 4pm, Wednesday, 10 December 2025.
 - o That witnesses be requested to return answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions within 7 business days of receipt.

The meeting adjourned at 1.55pm.

2.5 Public hearing

The Chair opened the public hearing at 1.58pm and made a short opening statement.

The following witness was admitted:

- Ms Rachel Mackenzie, Chief Executive Officer, Berries Australia, appearing via videoconference, was affirmed and examined.

Mr Kirby joined proceedings at 2.10pm.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

Ms Kaliyanda joined proceedings at 2.20pm.

The following witness was admitted:

- Mr Paul Shoker, farmer, appearing via videoconference, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The following witness was admitted:

- Mr Chris Magner, Chairman, Richmond and Wilsons Combined Water Users Association, appearing via videoconference, was sworn and examined.

Evidence concluded and the witness withdrew.

The hearing ended at 3.27pm.

Post-hearing deliberative meeting

The meeting resumed at 3.27pm.

2.6 Publication of transcript of evidence

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the corrected transcript of public evidence given today be authorised for publication and uploaded on the Committee's webpage.

3. ***

4. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 3.32 pm until a date and time to be determined.

Minutes of meeting no 31

11.01AM, 24 February 2026

Jubilee Room, Parliament House and Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair) (in person), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Mr Kirby, Mr Williamson, Ms Stuart and Ms Kaliyanda (all via videoconference).

Apologies

Mr Clancy.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Patrick Glynn, Alex Read, Naomi Parkinson, Art Bae and Nicolle Gill.

AGENDA ITEM**1. Confirmation of minutes**

Resolved, on the motion of Ms Kaliyanda: That the minutes of the meeting of 2 December 2025 be confirmed.

2. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities**2.1 Inquiry correspondence**

The Committee noted correspondence from Jonathan Howard, received 13 December 2025, regarding his response to a question taken on notice during the public hearing on 24 November 2025. Mr Howard subsequently decided to request a transcript correction, in lieu of providing a separate response.

2.2 Supplementary submissions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee accept the supplementary submissions, numbered 23a, 61a and 83a, and publish them on its website with standard redactions.

2.3 Publication of responses to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That answers to questions taken on notice and supplementary questions be published on the Committee's webpage.

14 August 2025 (Broken Hill)

Organisation	Question Type	Date Received
Dan Schulz	Question on notice	21 October 2025

9 October 2025 (Narrabri)

Organisation	Question Type	Date Received
Macquarie Marshes Environmental Landholders Association	Supplementary question	22 December 2025

10 October 2025 (Bourke)

Organisation	Question Type	Date Received
Bourke Shire Council	Supplementary question	9 January 2026

24 November 2025 (Parliament House)

Organisation	Question Type	Date Received
Centre for Technology in Water and Wastewater, University of Technology Sydney	Supplementary question	22 December 2025
NSW Farmers	Supplementary questions	19 December 2025
NSW Farmers	Questions on notice	16 December 2025
Dairy Australia	Questions on notice	11 December 2025
Professor Sarah Wheeler	Questions on notice	9 December 2025
Professor Sarah Wheeler	Supplementary questions	5 February 2026

28 November 2025 (Parliament House)

Organisation	Question Type	Date Received
NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	Question on notice	28 November 2025
Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder	Supplementary questions	9 January 2026
NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	Supplementary questions	13 January 2026

2.4 Publication of responses to questions from the Committee

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali: That the following answers to written questions from the Committee be published on the Committee's webpage:

- NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, dated 27 January 2026
- The Environmental Defenders Office, dated 14 January 2026.
- Murray Darling Basin Authority, dated 14 January 2026.

2.5 Transcript corrections

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the Committee accept and publish correspondence received from Dr Howard on 28 December 2025, and insert a footnote at the relevant point in the transcript linking to the correspondence.

3. *****4. Next meeting**

The meeting adjourned at 11.07 am until a date and time to be determined.

Unconfirmed Minutes of meeting no 32

1.07PM, 20 April 2026

Room 1254, Parliament House and Videoconference

Members present

Mr Butler (Chair), Mr Bali (Deputy Chair), Mr Williamson, Ms McInerney (all via videoconference) and Mr Kirby.

Apologies

Mr Clancy and Ms Kaliyanda.

Officers present

Kieran Lewis, Jerson Balaton, Naomi Parkinson, Alex Read and Nicolle Gill.

AGENDA ITEM

1. Confirmation of minutes

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the minutes of the meeting of 24 February 2026 be confirmed.

2. Committee membership change

The Committee noted the following extract from the Votes and Proceedings, no 150, entry no 18:

18. LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON INVESTMENT, INDUSTRY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT - MEMBERSHIP
Mr Ron Hoenig moved, That Katelin McInerney be appointed to serve on the Legislative Assembly Committee on Investment, Industry and Regional Development in place of Maryanne Norma Stuart, discharged.
Question put and passed.

3. Inquiry into the impacts of the Water Amendment (Restoring Our Rivers) Act 2023 on NSW regional communities

3.1 Publication of response to questions from the Committee

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That the answers to written questions from the Committee from the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, dated 25 February 2026, be published on the Committee's webpage.

3.2 Publication of question taken on notice at the public hearing

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That the Committee accept Phil Bartolo's response to a question taken on notice at the public hearing at Parliament House on 28 November 2025, received 10 April 2026, and publish it on the Committee's webpage.

3.3 Resolution permitting recording of video meeting

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby, seconded Mr Bali: That the Committee agrees to record the meeting for the purposes of committee staff preparing the minutes and report amendments, and that the recording be deleted once the report is tabled.

3.4 Consideration of the Chair's draft report

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson, seconded Ms McInerney: That the Committee considers the Chair's draft report chapter by chapter.

Chapter 1

- Mr Bali proposed that paragraph 1.16 be amended by adding the words: 'This is achieved mainly through Water Sharing Plans and licensing.' after the words 'planning and licencing decisions.'
- Mr Bali proposed that Recommendation 1 be amended by adding the words: 'recovery' after the words 'incorporates up to date modelling on water' and adding the words 'on available water reliability.' after the words 'impacts of rules-based changes'

The Committee agreed to the amendments.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby: That Chapter 1 as amended stand as part of the report.

Chapter 2

- Mr Bali proposed that a new Finding 3 be added at the beginning of chapter 2 with the words: 'Water buybacks have been concentrated in some areas and have had negative socio-economic impacts in all regions and towns.'
- Mr Kirby proposed that the new Finding 3 be amended by adding the words 'and undefined environmental outcomes' after the words 'all regions and towns.'
- Mr Bali proposed that Recommendation 4 be amended by adding the words 'the socio-economic impacts in affected regions and' after the words 'water buybacks in NSW until'.
- Mr Williamson proposed that Recommendation 4 be amended by omitting the words 'advocate for postponing' and instead adding the word 'oppose'.

The Committee agreed to the amendments.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That Chapter 2 as amended stand as part of the report.

Chapter 3

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali, That chapter 3 stand as part of the report.

Chapter 4

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Bali, That chapter 4 stand as part of the report.

Chapter 5

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby, That chapter 5 stand as part of the report.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Kirby:

1. That the draft report as amended, be the report of the Committee and that it be signed by the Chair and presented to the House.
2. That the Chair and Committee staff be permitted to correct stylistic, typographical and grammatical errors.
3. That, once tabled, the report be posted on the Committee's webpage.

The Committee noted the proposed report cover, an image of the Darling River at Wilcannia, taken by Committee staff.

3.5 Consideration of the Chair's draft report

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson: That the Committee considers the Chair's draft report in globo.

Resolved, on the motion of Mr Williamson:

1. That the draft report be the report of the Committee and that it be signed by the Chair and presented to the House.
2. That the Chair and Committee staff be permitted to correct stylistic, typographical and grammatical errors.
3. That, once tabled, the report be posted on the Committee's webpage.

The Committee noted the proposed report cover, an image of the Darling River at Wilcannia, taken by Committee staff.

4. ***

5. ***

6. Next meeting

The meeting adjourned at 2.20pm until 15 May 2026.