

Governing environmental flows

Plans, policies and strategies to support healthy waterways

Water allocated and managed specifically to improve the health of rivers, wetlands and floodplains is known as water for the environment.

The Environment and Heritage Group is the lead agency for management of water for the environment in NSW. Part of NSW's Department of Planning and Environment, we do this work in the context of legislation, strategies and plans, both state and federal.

This fact sheet explains this regulatory framework that governs how water is managed for the environment in NSW.

Water Act 2007

The *Water Act 2007* is the overarching Commonwealth legislative framework for managing the Murray–Darling Basin in the national interest. This Act established the Murray–Darling Basin Authority and authorises it to establish and regulate the water market. The Act also established the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder.

The Act aims to:

- improve water security
- optimise economic, social and environmental outcomes
- ensure sustainable levels of water extraction to protect and restore the environment
- achieve efficient and cost-effective water management practices.

Murray–Darling Basin Plan

The Murray–Darling Basin Authority developed the Murray–Darling Basin Plan (Basin Plan) to manage water across the Basin in an integrated and sustainable way.

Adopted in 2012, the Basin Plan's 3 main objectives govern its work:

- protect and restore the Basin's water-dependent ecosystems
- protect and restore the ecosystem functions of water-dependent ecosystems
- ensure that water-dependent ecosystems are resilient to climate change and other risks and threats.

The Basin Plan:

- establishes and enforces compliance with sustainable diversion limits, the average amount of water towns, communities, industry and farmers can take from the Basin on a sustainable basis
- identifies risks to water resources and strategies to better manage them
- sets requirements for Basin states' water sharing plans
- incorporates an environmental watering plan to optimise environmental outcomes
- establishes rules for trading of water rights in the Basin
- requires jurisdictions to prepare water resource plans and long-term water plans for each water source.

Basin-wide environmental watering strategy

The Basin-wide environmental watering strategy plans and manages Basin-scale environmental watering over the long term. It sets out improvements to:

- river flows and connectivity
- native vegetation
- waterbirds
- native fish.

These key themes are features of healthy river systems, highly valued by the community, that we expect to see improve with water recovered from the Basin. Each theme has specific and measurable indicators that can be monitored on the path to achieving the Basin Plan's environmental objectives.



The strategy supports environmental water holders, Basin state governments, water managers and river operators to plan and manage environmental watering at a Basin scale and over the long term, to achieve the environmental objectives of the Basin Plan. It's complemented by regional long-term water plans for each water resource plan area, which have a catchment focus.

Water Management Act 2000

The *Water Management Act 2000* is a piece of NSW legislation that aims to govern the state's water use for present and future generations in a sustainable and integrated way.

The Act is based on the concept of ecologically sustainable development, which is development today that doesn't threaten future generations' ability to meet their needs. The Act recognises that:

- we must protect the fundamental health of our rivers, groundwater systems, and associated wetlands, floodplains and estuaries
- we must integrate management of water with that of vegetation, soils, land and other natural resources
- government and communities share responsibility for effective water management
- water management decisions must consider environmental, social, economic, cultural and heritage aspects
- we need to provide licence holders with more secure access to water, and greater opportunities to trade water through separation of water licences from land
- the state will gain social and economic benefits when water is used sustainably and efficiently.

Recognising that we need water for environmentally healthy rivers and groundwater systems, the Act:

- uses water sharing plans to regulate water sharing
- regulates water extraction through licences and approvals
- provides for the registration and trading of water access rights, independent of land.

Water sharing plans

Water sharing plans set out rules to share water from a given source between users and the environment. They also lay out rules for trading this water. Water sharing plans are made by NSW's Minister for Water and agreed by the Minister for Environment.

The purpose of a water sharing plan is to:

- tell water users when and how water will be available for extraction
- protect the environmental health of the water source
- ensure the water source is sustainable for the long-term.

Water sharing plans allow water licence holders, including irrigators, to plan their business activities. Approximately 60% of water licenced under the *Water Management Act 2000* is for irrigation.

Water sharing plans also aim to ensure that water is specifically provided for the environment through a legally binding plan.

Water resource plans

Water resource plans are frameworks and rules for managing Basin water resources in NSW. The plans are prepared by jurisdictions and accredited by the Commonwealth.

The plans aim to maintain healthy and resilient water ecosystems by balancing community, environmental, economic and cultural outcomes.

The *Water Act 2007* and the Basin Plan require water resource plans to:

- describe all water rights in the plan area
- demonstrate how the plans assess and maintain compliance with sustainable diversion limits
- include a water quality management plan

- provide for environmental watering
- address risks to water resources identified in a risk assessment
- explain how essential human needs will be met in extreme events
- account for Aboriginal peoples' water-dependent cultural values and uses.

Long-term water plans

Long-term water plans help guide the management of water for the environment. Nine river catchments in NSW have long-term water plans informed by local, traditional and scientific knowledge. These plans help guide the work of environmental water management teams across NSW.

Long-term water plans aim to improve water management. They strive to use all available water within and between catchments to maximise the health of rivers and wetlands. They set objectives, targets and watering requirements for key plants, waterbirds, fish and system functions over timeframes of 5, 10 and 20 years.

Annual environmental water priority statements

Each year Basin states publish priorities for catchments. These annual environmental water priority statements consider the Basin-wide environmental watering strategy and relevant international agreements, such as the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

The NSW Department of Planning and Environment publishes these annual statements for 9 catchments:

- Murray and Lower Darling Baaka
- Murrumbidgee
- Lachlan
- Macquarie-Castlereagh
- Gwydir
- Barwon-Darling
- Border Rivers
- Intersecting Streams
- Namoi.

The department also publishes an annual statement on Aboriginal Environmental Water Priorities, as part of a commitment to ensure Aboriginal people have a genuine voice in water management today.

More information

[Water for the environment, Environment and Heritage Group](#)

[Murray–Darling Basin Authority](#)

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