

NSW Healthy Floodplains project

Taking a proactive approach to floodplain management in NSW

From its commencement in 2013, the aim of the NSW Healthy Floodplains project is to drive reform in water management across the Northern Basin floodplains. This includes managing development in floodplain areas and bringing water extractions from floodplains into the water licensing framework.

With a \$50 million funding commitment from the Commonwealth Government's Sustainable Rural Water Use and Infrastructure Program as part of the implementation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan in NSW, Department of Industry is implementing the Healthy Floodplains project across five valleys in northern NSW: the Border-Rivers, Gwydir, Namoi, Barwon-Darling and Macquarie valleys.

Healthy Floodplains and the Murray Darling Basin Plan

Once the NSW Healthy Floodplains project is completed, NSW will be consistent with the requirements detailed in the National Water Initiative and the NSW Floodplain Harvesting Policy. This project is also critical in enabling NSW to meet extraction limits defined in water sharing plans and sustainable diversion limits in the Murray–Darling Basin Plan.

The department is driving two key programs as part of the NSW Healthy Floodplains project:

1. Floodplain Management Planning program
2. Floodplain Harvesting program

Floodplain Management Planning program

NSW adopts a valley-scale, strategic approach to development in floodplains through the use of floodplain management plans. Using floodplain management plans, we can:

- minimise risks to life and property
- maintain the connection of flood waters to and from flood-dependent ecological and cultural assets.

The plans set clear rules and assessment criteria for new and amended flood works. They also define the works that can be built in specific parts of the floodplain, setting acceptable limits for the local and cumulative impacts of these works.

Under the floodplain management plans, existing access roads, infrastructure protection works, supply channels and stock refuges can be approved in retrospect, on the basis that they meet the assessment criteria for new and amended works.

The development of floodplain management plans involves extensive community consultation. To date, the department has facilitated over 120 events and consulted with over 480 participants. These participants represent a variety of stakeholder interests across the Northern Basin.

Floodplain management plans have commenced in the Gwydir and Barwon-Darling Valleys.

Draft floodplain management plans have been prepared for the other valleys in the Northern Basin, including the Upper and Lower Namoi, Border Rivers and Macquarie.

Floodplain Harvesting program

The NSW Floodplain Harvesting Policy, endorsed by the NSW Government in 2013, builds on previous extensive water management reforms. This policy is currently being implemented in five northern valleys, with a view to further implementation across NSW.

Approvals to construct earthworks associated with floodplain harvesting under both the Water Act 1912 (now repealed) and the Water Management Act 2000 have been required for many decades. The NSW Floodplain Harvesting Policy when implemented in a valley creates licenses for floodplain harvesting take.

The Policy aims to bring all legitimate floodplain harvesting diversions (those from historically approved infrastructure) within the water licensing framework under the *Water Management Act 2000*. These diversions will fall within pre-existing water sharing plan limits. This means that no additional water take is allowed and flows for downstream systems are not reduced

Existing hydrological models used to estimate water sharing plan limits accurately reflect river extractions and flows, but they do not accurately reflect what happens to the proportion of flood flows that leave the river and do not return. This is because the focus of these models to date has been on quantifying and managing within channel diversions and flows, not floodplain harvesting and flood flows.

As part of the NSW Floodplain Harvesting Policy, there has been an unprecedented investment in data and modelling to more accurately quantify these floodplain processes and more specifically the floodplain harvesting component of water sharing plan limits. These new hydrological models that improve the estimate of floodplain harvesting will be submitted to the Murray-Darling Basin Authority for review and accreditation as part of the water resource planning process.

Floodplain Harvesting Water Access Licences will be created through amendments to the Water Management Act Regulations. It is anticipated that licenses will begin to be rolled out for the Gwydir and Border Rivers in the second half of 2018, although all licences will take effect simultaneously during 2019.

In some areas of the Northern Basin there has been a significant growth in floodplain harvesting infrastructure causing floodplain harvesting diversions to increase above plan limits. The NSW Floodplain Harvesting Policy, when implemented, will function to restrict current floodplain harvesting activities so that diversions return back to the plan limits.

Following a public consultation period in March-April 2018, some refinements to the NSW Floodplain Harvesting Policy are proposed that will strengthen the policy framework, improve the monitoring framework and allow for flexibility during implementation, in order to better balance triple bottom line outcomes.

Regulation and compliance – floodplain harvesting

A compliance and enforcement strategy for floodplain harvesting is being developed as part of the Healthy Floodplains Project. There will be formal opportunities for stakeholder input into this strategy during its development. This strategy will be used to direct compliance and enforcement strategies to ensure that all unlicensed flood works and water supply work are either brought into compliance, modified or removed in accordance with the requirements of the WMA, floodplain management plans and water sharing plans. It will also be used to ensure compliance with floodplain harvesting monitoring requirements including auditing and verification processes.

More information

For more information on the NSW Healthy Floodplains project, please contact floodplain.harvesting@dpi.nsw.gov.au

You can also visit www.water.nsw.gov.au for further information on the NSW Healthy Floodplains project and its two programs, Floodplain Management Plans and Floodplain Harvesting.

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