

Sustainable water extraction in coastal catchments

The NSW Government is committed to setting sustainable levels of extraction in coastal NSW to manage water access for the future

Harvestable rights limit returned to 10% in coastal NSW in September 2023

As of 27 September 2023, the harvestable rights limit for coastal NSW has been returned to the previous limit of 10% to allow sustainable levels of extraction to be determined first.

Catchment-based assessments that were announced as part of the previous increase in coastal harvestable rights have been paused. An increase in coastal harvestable rights limits above 10% can be considered when sustainable extraction levels are understood.

Sustainable extraction in coastal catchments

Understanding and then making decisions about the management of water access in coastal NSW needs to be done in the right order. We need to focus on determining sustainable levels of extraction on the coast first, so we can improve management of water access and drought resilience on the coast.

Water sharing plans place rules around how much water can be extracted from rivers and aquifers in NSW. It is important to ensure the amount of water that is allowed to be taken is sustainable in the long-term.

A lot of work has been done on inland water sharing plans to understand water requirements and to manage extraction to protect the environment and other users. Improving our understanding of water requirements on the coast is fundamental to making robust water management decisions.

In coastal water sharing plans for unregulated river systems, the current limits on how much water users can extract in one year is the sum of existing water entitlements and an estimate of basic landholder rights. Though this sets a baseline for the level of entitlement in place when a water sharing plan commences, work is needed to further improve our understanding of the sustainable level of extraction, including assessing climate change risks, so the needs of the environment and the community can be met into the future.

Defining sustainable extraction in coastal water sharing plans will:

- ensure that water is shared equitably among users
- provide water users with greater certainty in their share of the resource
- identify if and where additional water entitlements could be made available.

Determining sustainable extraction in coastal catchments will include licensed water take and basic landholder rights. It will consider water taken out of a river or connected aquifer as well as overland flow that is intercepted in dams or other diversion works.

What this change means

Prioritising work to determine sustainable extraction in coastal catchments will provide an improved holistic understanding of water availability in coastal regions and guide how to improve management of water access and drought resilience on the coast.

Coastal regions with water available within sustainable levels can then be targeted for allocating unassigned water, improving water markets and trade, managing on farm storage, considering changes to coastal harvestable rights limits, and improving rights and access for Aboriginal people.

Work already undertaken for the catchment-based assessments will be used to inform this analysis.

Landholders who have already increased their storages

Landholders who have already notified the department of their intent to access their harvestable right above the 10% limit will be contacted about the changes. Landholders who have commenced construction of a harvestable rights dam above the 10% limit before 27 September 2023 and are yet to notify the department are still required to notify within 28 days of construction commencing.

If you started works within the 28-day period before 27 September 2023 and haven't submitted a notification form, you can do so until 24 October 2023.

Having your say about sustainable extraction in coastal catchments

Sustainable extraction in coastal catchments has already been discussed with stakeholders as part of the recent replacement of some coastal water sharing plans and is identified as a priority in coastal regional water strategies. It is a key recommendation made by the Natural Resources Commission for all recent coastal water sharing plan reviews.

We will build on the valuable information already gained through the community and stakeholder meetings held as part of the 2021 Coastal Harvestable Rights Review, catchment-based assessments, the development of regional water strategies and NSW water sharing planning processes.

Stakeholders will continue to be consulted throughout the work to understand sustainable extraction in coastal catchments to make sure available information and knowledge is considered. The department will provide more information about this critical work and how you can be involved once the approach is developed.

For more information

Visit our website at www.water.nsw.gov.au/harvestable-rights.