

Lower Darling meeting 2 - 20 March 2020

A subset of the Barwon Darling/Lower Darling CWAP convened on 20 March 2020 to discuss the recommencement of flows to the Lower Darling.

A summary of the meeting outcomes is provided below.

Further information on the function and membership of critical water advisory panels can be found in this [fact sheet](#).

The Lower Darling is currently in drought Stage 3 – Severe Drought according to the NSW Extreme Events Policy. This valley has recently been de-escalated from Stage 4 – Critical Drought because of the recent inflows into Menindee Lakes which will enable flows to be re-commenced in the Lower Darling.

Forecast flows to reach Menindee Lakes

Regular flow forecast updates are being published by WaterNSW on their operations updates webpage - <https://www.waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates>.

At the time of the meeting:

Total flows into Menindee Lakes had reached 96GL, with water starting to enter the floodplain at Lake Wetherell.

It was estimated that a total volume of 275-340GL would reach Menindee Lakes as a result of the current flow event. There is potential for flows to reach up to 370GL.

As expected, high losses were observed at Menindee Lakes as the lakes attached to Lake Wetherell started to fill – through dead storage and wetting losses. 20GL in losses occurred between Wilcannia and Lake Wetherell.

Water quality at the main weir and at the Lake Wetherell outlet is continuing to improve as fresher flows are mixing in.

C-Class pumping ceased along the mid-section of the Barwon Darling between Bourke and Louth as flow levels dropped below the threshold for C-Class access. Most water take is occurring in B-Class.

Flows at Bourke and Wilcannia were approx. 10GL/day and 13GL/day respectively.

More flows from the Culgoa River were expected to add to flows in the Barwon River. The peak of the Culgoa flows was expected to enter the Barwon in a few days.

Rainfall is expected to continue in the upper northern Basin valleys for the next few weeks and months.

Block bank removal

The first block bank, located at Karoola, has been removed. Removal of the second block bank at Court Nareen commenced 23 March. Work on the third block bank at Jamesville will commence 30 March. Removal of the last block bank at Ashvale is expected to commence on 6 April. The pulse release will commence once the first two block banks are removed.

Managing releases to the Lower Darling

The volumes expected to arrive in Menindee Lakes will allow a first flush of the river followed by lower continuous flows to provide security to the Lower Darling for as long as possible (12-18 months) while maintaining connectivity to Wentworth.

WaterNSW commenced releases of 200ML/day through the main weir at Lake Wetherell on 18 March and 50ML/day from the Wetherell weir on 20 March (total 250ML/day). Daily water sampling and profiling is being done in close consultation with DPI-Fisheries to minimise any potential impacts on refuge fish populations below the weir.

Since the meeting, WaterNSW published further advice on the timing and flow rates of releases down the river on their operations updates page - <https://www.waternsw.com.au/supply/regional-nsw/operations-updates>. Higher releases for the first flush of the river commenced on 26 March with the release of 500 ML/day increasing to 3000ML/day within 3 to 4 days. Releases are then expected to be held at this rate for 7 days and then progressively reduced down to 300ML/day.

It is difficult to predict how long flows will take to move down the river. The river has been dry for over a year and residual pools of water are very low. Losses are expected to be greater than the last flow event in 2016 as a result.

Flow rates of the first flush must be increased and decreased according to prescribed rates of rise and fall.

Flow rates are determined in close consultation with the DPIE-EES and DPI-Fisheries. It is important that the size of the first flush is balanced with the longevity of river flows so that water quality impacts are minimised, benefits to critical ecosystems are maximised and flows can continue down the length of the Lower Darling for as long as possible.

Potential measures to minimise water quality impacts in the Wentworth Weir Pool when flows arrive are being considered in consultation with the Murray Darling Basin Authority.

Once flows recommence along the length of the Lower Darling, there is the opportunity to ease restrictions and return to more normal operations. Stakeholders should continue to refer to water allocation statements published on the DPIE-Water website to stay updated - <https://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/allocations/statements>

Update on response to fish kills

At the time of the meeting, further fish kills had been reported since the fish kill event that occurred at the top of Lake Wetherell as flows entered the Menindee Lakes system.

More information on how the NSW Government is responding to the heightened risk of fish kills during the current drought can be found on the DPI website - <https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/habitat/threats/fish-kills>

Water quality will be monitored as the first flush makes its way down the Lower Darling and DPI-Fisheries/MDBA are aiming to keep the remaining aerators in place as flows arrive to minimise any impacts on fish populations.

Agencies present

- NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment
 - Water Division (DPIE-Water)
 - Environment, Energy and Science Division (DPIE-EES)

- NSW Department of Primary Industries
 - DPI Agriculture
 - DPI Fisheries
- WaterNSW
- NSW Environment Protection Authority
- Wentworth Shire Council

Next meeting

Meetings are being held every Friday for the next few weeks as flows move down the river.