



Natural
Resources
Commission

Review of the *Water Sharing Plan for the Lower North Coast Unregulated and Alluvial Water Sources 2009* – Report summary

Our review

- The Natural Resources Commission (the Commission) has a statutory role under s43A of the *Water Management Act 2000* to review water sharing plans approaching expiry
- Our reviews consider if the environmental, social, cultural and economic outcomes of a plan have been achieved, and what improvements can be made
- As part of our reviews, we recommend whether a plan should be extended or replaced
- Our reviews consider relevant data and documents, technical advice, stakeholder consultation and public submissions
- We received 8 public submissions for this review



Lower North Coast plan area

- The *Water Sharing Plan for the Lower North Coast Unregulated and Alluvial Water Sources 2009* (the Plan) covers water source in the Manning River, Great Lakes and Karuah River catchments
- Water managed under the Plan provides part of the flows for important environmental assets, including the Great Lakes, the Ramsar-listed Myall Lakes, and 8 high priority groundwater dependent ecosystems
- It also provides town water for the growing MidCoast Council area and underpins the regional economy, which relies on the areas amenity and water assets
- Waterways in the region hold significant social, economic and cultural values to the Worimi and Biripai peoples

The Plan should be replaced

The Commission's advice is that the Plan should be:

- **Extended until June 2022** with priority amendments and actions for extraction limits, available water determinations, licensee notifications, ecological flow studies and socioeconomic impact assessments progressed during this period – the extension period will provide time for the completion of these studies and implementation of recommendations in this review prior to Plan replacement
- **Replaced by June 2022** with a replacement plan intended to strengthen rules protecting environmental outcomes and increase the appropriateness of other provisions governing water extraction

Summary of key findings

River condition

- Limited ecological monitoring indicates that river condition in the Manning and Karuah catchments is generally good but there are pressures on estuaries and fish condition
- Stakeholders raised concerns about ecological health of water sources and environmental flows

Long-term average annual extraction limits (LTAAELs)

- There is no clear, volumetric extraction limits or accounting for all water take
- Entitlements appear to have increased in some water sources with high instream and economic values, which poses a potential risk to planned environmental water

Summary of key findings (cont.)

Environmental flow provisions

- The Plan has relatively sophisticated rules to maintain planned environmental water compared to other plans developed in the same period
- Ecological studies were undertaken to set default thresholds for 27 management zones but the proposed changes were not fully implemented
- Licence holders were not notified in writing of the changes to access licence conditions for flow class rules, a requirement for them to take affect – this issue is now being addressed

Social and cultural outcomes

- Town water supply, basic landholder rights and harvestable rights were provided for, but climate change and population growth pose future risks
- There was limited consideration of Aboriginal water values or support for cultural water - barriers include lack of awareness, a complex licensing system and barriers to water access and use
- Native title determinations were provided for but the Plan does not specify timelines for the required amendments following a successful native title claim

Summary of key findings (cont.)

Trade provisions and economic impacts

- There are provisions for trade under specified conditions but some stakeholders consider trade is limited by rules restricting trade between water sources
- Some stakeholders are concerned that the socioeconomic impact study of cease to pump thresholds did not address the full range of potential social or economic impacts and risks

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

- The Plan does not clearly specify outcomes or have well defined objectives, strategies and performance indicators
- Comprehensive monitoring, evaluation and reporting has not been implemented to assess the extent to which the Plan's outcomes are being met



Summary of key recommendations

The Commission recommends the Plan should be updated as follows:

LTAELs

- Establish and publish numeric extraction limits that consider all forms of take, and review and update available determinations
- Audit licences to determine if they are consistent with Act and to understand increases
- Implement a timely notification process for changes to licence conditions for licensees

Environmental flow provisions

- Base flow class provisions on environmental water requirements and build on ecological flow studies to inform provisions



Summary of key recommendations (cont.)

Social and cultural values

- Allow investigations for storage facilities from allowable sources and maintain flow regimes
- Include amendment provisions for native title rights
- Identify Aboriginal values, flow allocations and better support water access and use options

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

- Include SMART objectives, strategies and performance indicators
- Improve plan-specific monitoring, evaluation and reporting