INLAND RIVERS NETWORK

Northern Basin Connectivity Program – the slow road to fixing the Darling-Baaka

The NSW Government continues to drag its feet on the dire need to improve flows into the Darling-Baaka. Internationally shameful fish kills, ongoing poor water quality, daily management of Menindee Lakes, temporary water restrictions, reems of reports and 24 scientifically validated recommendations from the Connectivity Expert Panel released in 2024 have resulted in little to no genuine permanent action.

A lot of effort has gone into very narrow analysis and modelling under the Northern Basin Connectivity Program [https://www.water.dcceew.nsw.gov.au/our-work/projects-and-programs/northern-basin-connectivity-program) with a number of reports released in February to stimulate feedback and discussion.

The NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water (DCCEEW) water planners have stated that: '*the independent recommendations are not Government policy and this current analysis is not the Government's formal response'*

Environment groups have responded with detailed submissions outlining the urgent need for action and the problems with the narrow approach currently under consideration.

Meanwhile the review of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan has identified Northern Basin Connectivity as a key issue that must be addressed. The MDBA discussion paper identifies that '*The initial assessments of sustainable diversion limits (SDLs) for the Barwon–Darling and Lower Darling show that ecosystem function and native fish outcomes are at risk due to lack of river connectivity*. (2026 Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review Chapter 5 *Improving river connectivity in the northern Basin* p48)

Inland Rivers Network continues to urge the NSW Government to step up for the ecological integrity of the Darling-Baaka, for First Nations rights and for the communities dependent on a healthy river system.

Namoi River - directly connected to Barwon-Darking – Bev Smiles

The Pathway Forward

- **Implement all 24 recommendations in full, without further delay;**
- **Apply the precautionary principle by acting now and refining through adaptive management;**
- **Protect small and large freshes, particularly during non-dry periods;**
- **Regulate floodplain harvesting and rainfall runoff capture as a priority;**
- **Extend robust extraction rules to unregulated tributaries immediately;**
- **Rebalance policy to prioritise natural flows over dam releases;**
- **Establish independent oversight to ensure transparency and accountability; and**
- **Develop a comprehensive economic framework that reflects full system values and risks.**

Connectivity Reform Must Go Further: Why Full Implementation of Expert Panel Advice Is Critical for the Darling-Baaka

Despite decades of reform, investment, and legislative change, the continued and dramatic decline in river health across the Murray–Darling Basin—particularly in the Darling-Baaka—points to a fundamental truth: existing water management is failing. The Government commissioned a specialist independent consultant report to identify solutions (the Expert Panel Report 2024) but have failed to implement the policies and measures our best river and water experts determined. Without full and timely implementation of the Panel's recommendations, ecological recovery and long-term economic resilience will remain out of reach.

The Inland Rivers Network (IRN), drawing on more than three decades of engagement with water reform since, 1991 argues that the root of the problem lies in systemic under-regulation of water extraction—particularly in the Northern Basin of New South Wales. Over time, significant volumes of water have been allocated through new Supplementary and Floodplain Harvesting licences, without fully accounting for downstream impacts. Critically, rainfall runoff capture remains inadequately regulated, raising serious concerns about compliance with both the Water Management Act 2000 and the Murray–Darling Basin Plan.

These gaps have contributed directly to the ecological collapse observed in the Darling-Baaka. Reduced flows from northern tributaries have undermined connectivity, exacerbating water quality issues, increasing the frequency of fish kills, and placing immense pressure on communities and ecosystems downstream. The Connectivity Expert Panel's recommendations are explicitly designed to address these issues by restoring the flow regimes that sustain river health and community wellbeing.

While DCCEEW has undertaken modelling through its Northern Basin Connectivity Program, its current focus is too narrow The analysis centres on three key rule changes—end-of-system flow targets, extended resumption of flow (first flush rules), and a Connectivity Environmental Water Allowance—primarily relying on releases from regulated storages. Although these measures are important, they do not address the full scope of the problem.

A major omission is the lack of reform in unregulated water sources. The Expert Panel made several recommendations to improve management of these systems, particularly those directly connected to the Barwon-Darling River. Yet these have not been incorporated into current modelling or policy proposals. This is a critical gap. Allowing extraction to continue until "no visible flow" remains fundamentally inconsistent with both legislative objectives and ecological requirements.

Practical solutions exist. IRN has highlighted cost-effective alternatives to traditional gauging systems that would enable enforceable cease-to-pump rules across unregulated streams. The argument that reform cannot proceed due to insufficient monitoring infrastructure is unconvincing. An adaptive management approach—one that prioritises ecological connectivity over technological constraints—should be adopted immediately.

Equally concerning is the failure to address opportunistic water extraction during non-dry periods. The Panel recommended the protection of small and large "freshes"—short-duration flow events critical for ecosystem function. These flows play a vital role in maintaining channel health, supporting native fish breeding, and improving water quality. However, current policy settings allow supplementary and floodplain harvesting to intercept these flows, effectively stripping the system of its natural variability.

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Response to DCCEEW approach to implementing Connectivity rules

The Government's current approach represents a significant retreat from the science, the law, and the urgency of the crisis facing the Barwon-Darling/Baaka system. The plan is characterised by delay, selective implementation, and a reluctance to address the most politically and operationally difficult reforms—particularly those affecting upstream extraction.

Delay Disguised as Caution

The reliance on further modelling, consultation, and staged processes before implementing key reforms is an approach framed by DCCEEW as prudent. It is, in reality, a failure to apply the precautionary principle. The environment is bearing all the risk of delay.

The Panel's recommendations were already based on extensive scientific evidence. There is no justification to continue delaying the adoption of all 24 recommendations.

A Piecemeal and Diluted Reform Agenda

The Government's selective approach to implementation has analysed some elements of the Panel's recommendations—particularly those relating to dry-time flows, while ignoring or deferring other critical components.

The current approach cannot deliver the required connectivity outcomes. Under proposed rule changes, key environmental targets—especially large freshes—remain unmet. The failure to model or implement protections for small and large freshes during non-dry periods is significant. These flows are essential to ecosystem function. Their absence from the current approach is a fundamental deviation from the Panel's advice.

Failure to Tackle Floodplain Harvesting and Runoff Capture

The current exemption for rainfall runoff capture, leaving it outside the licencing and water accounting framework, is a major failure of the NSW Government to properly manage water extraction. Floodplain harvesting and rainfall runoff capture are major drivers of connectivity failure, yet they remain largely unaddressed in the current approach.

The most effective policy lever available to improve connectivity is the restriction of opportunistic extraction during key flow periods.

The current modelling framework prioritises dam releases, effectively shifting the burden of connectivity onto stored water rather than protecting natural flows. This distorts both environmental and economic outcomes.

Unregulated Tributaries: A Critical Blind Spot

The Panel identified unregulated tributaries as critical to restoring connectivity, yet the Government has proposed a new, slow, multi-stage process to categorise and prioritise these water sources before implementing reforms.

Sufficient information already exists to begin implementing rule changes immediately. Practical, low-cost methods for implementing improved rules without waiting for new gauging infrastructure are available. The Government's failure to adopt or even test these approaches is a lack of willingness rather than a lack of capacity.

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Over-Reliance on Dam Releases

The heavy reliance on dam releases to achieve connectivity targets is inefficient and contrary to the Panel's intent. While environmental water allocations have a role to play, the protection of natural inflows should have highest priority.

By failing to model restrictions on supplementary access and floodplain harvesting, the Government has artificially inflated the importance—and perceived cost—of dam-based solutions. This not only misrepresents the available policy options but also risks placing unnecessary pressure on stored water resources. Dam releases should be a secondary measure for achieving connectivity flows and targets

Governance Failures and Lack of Accountability

The Government's decision to reject the Panel's recommendation for an independent oversight body threatens the credibility of the reform process. Without independent oversight, implementation risks being opaque and vulnerable to influence from vested interests. The lack of transparency in modelling and decision-making further compounds this concern, creating a "black box" approach to water management.

Skewed and Incomplete Economic Analysis

The Government's economic analysis focuses narrowly on the costs to irrigators while ignoring the broader benefits of improved river health. The value of ecosystem services, tourism, recreational fishing, and cultural outcomes—particularly for First Nations communities must be included. The absence of a "do nothing" scenario is a critical flaw, leaving policymakers without a clear understanding of the costs of continued environmental decline.


Darling at Wilcannia 2015 Emma Hollows

A Test of Political Will

The Government already has the evidence, the tools, and the roadmap required to restore connectivity in the Northern Basin. What is lacking is not knowledge, but commitment. By pursuing a cautious, incremental approach that avoids the most challenging reforms, the Government risks entrenching the very problems the Connectivity Expert Panel was established to solve.

It is imperative to move beyond analysis and to act decisively. The health of the Darling-Baaka—and the communities, ecosystems, and economies it supports—depends on immediate action.