



Mr Terry Smith
Chair Menindee Stakeholder Advisory Group
Scarsdale Station
4604 Menindee Road
BROKEN HILL NSW 2880

Email: scarsdalestation@bigpond.com

Dear Mr Smith

Subject: Menindee Lower Darling Stakeholder Advisory Group engagement

Firstly, I would like to thank you and the members of the Menindee Lower Darling Stakeholder Advisory Group for attending the meeting on 24 February 2021 with representatives from across the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment's (DPIE) Water Group. I want to apologise again for myself and other key senior executives being unable to attend in person, given we all had pre-existing commitments that required us to be in Sydney. I also want to apologise for the technological difficulties. I know it was frustrating for your members, as it was for those of us on the line. We are exploring options to ensure this doesn't occur again in future meetings.

On a positive note, the discussions were informative and constructive, and I believe we have a clearer pathway forward to work with the Lower Darling community on the water management issues raised through the SAG.

As stated at the meeting, the DPIE Water team will temporarily suspend discussions with the SAG on the Menindee project, and focus its discussions on the wider concerns of the group, in particular connectivity and the critical human and environmental needs that may depend on this.

1. **Consideration of the s.324 provision of the *Water Management Act 2000***

DPIE Water understands that several SAG members have concerns about how section 324 of the *Water Management Act 2000* is currently being administered and whether or not it is contributing to healthy river outcomes.

DPIE Water commits to undertaking further work to determine the circumstances and triggers under which temporary water restrictions may be applied to meet critical human and environmental needs along the river systems.

DPIE Water will consult with key stakeholders, which will contribute to the development of the final decisions on the triggers and circumstances. This consultation will commence in July 2021.

Timing: By 1 July 2021 – develop and publish draft new triggers for critical environmental needs to be considered when imposing temporary restrictions

By 1 July 2022 – develop and publish new triggers for critical human needs to be considered when imposing temporary restrictions

2. Review targets in North West Unregulated Flow Management Plan (NWUFMP)

DPIE Water is currently reviewing existing targets in the North West Unregulated Flow Management Plan, and carrying out technical studies and other work to ensure that any decisions to update them, including the consideration of additional targets, are made based on the best available science and information. In addition, an operational management plan is also being developed for the NWUFMP to guide its implementation.

DPIE Water is committed to ongoing consultation and engagement with the SAG and the broader local community on the review of the plan's targets and its operation.

Timing: By 1 September 2021 – review the existing targets and develop a draft implementation program

By 1 January 2022 – consult on these targets and their implementation

From 1 July 2022 – implement targets

3. Addressing connectivity via Regional Water Strategies

DPIE recognises that many of the community's concerns regarding water in the Menindee area is linked to issues of connectivity of the northern river systems. These concerns have also been raised in other NSW valleys. The department is investing in new climate modelling which is helping define potential future risks around droughts and low flow scenarios and will carry out a comprehensive program of work to better define connectivity from the northern tributaries and down through Menindee and the Lower Darling.

These studies will inform the draft Western Regional Water Strategy which is due to be released towards the end of this year and will include:

- A proposed definition of connectivity.
- Hydrological modelling to assess the extent to which the actions already undertaken to improve connectivity have been effective.
- Additional connectivity options for discussion such as proposed flow targets for the Menindee Lakes and/or at the confluence with the Murray River.
- Initial results of modelling incorporating new climate data.

DPIE Water is committed to engagement with the SAG and other stakeholders over the next few months to enable members to provide feedback on the connectivity elements of the draft strategy. Further details of how this will be achieved will be discussed with the SAG in the coming weeks and when an appropriate forum is established.

Please note the final Western RWS will be released in 2022, and any changes required to improve connectivity will be incorporated in the water sharing plans by 2023.

Timing: Ongoing consultation process throughout 2021 and beyond

By December 2021: draft regional water strategies for all NSW inland areas

By December 2022: final regional water strategies for all NSW inland areas

From 2023: RWS implementation including water sharing plan amendments

Meeting with DPIE Water Executive

The DPIE Water Executive are committed to meeting with the Menindee SAG in person so that we can continue to discuss the concerns of those they represent and work together to identify constructive ways of working together to resolve these. Attendees will include Jim Bentley - CEO NSW Water Sector, Anissa Levy - CEO Water Infrastructure NSW, Amanda Jones – Chief Strategy Officer, Vanessa O’Keefe – Executive Director Policy & Planning and Allan Raine – Director Water Planning Implementation.

Dates are currently being investigated and my office will be in touch shortly to coordinate the meeting.

Many thanks again for your time and I look forward to continuing our discussions and working together to realise outcomes for the environment and communities of Menindee.

Yours sincerely

Anissa Levy
CEO Water Infrastructure NSW

10 March 2021