



# Review of the Operation and Management of the Menindee Lakes System

15 May 2026

*The Murray Regional Strategy Group was formed during the depths of the drought water crisis in 2018. A fully incorporated organisation, MRSG comprises representatives from organisations representing NSW Murray Valley water users on water issues. Our members include Murray Valley Private Diverters, Ricegrowers Association of Australia, West Corrgan Private Irrigation District, Murray Irrigation Limited, Southern Riverina Irrigators, and Speak-Up 4 Water campaign.*

*For more information: <https://www.murrayregionalstrategygroup.com.au>*

## Introduction.

We thank the MDBA for undertaking this review into Menindee on behalf of the Basin Officials' Committee (BOC).<sup>1</sup> We appreciate the extension of time you were able to provide so that we could get this submission to you.

The active management of water held in Menindee has been an essential contributor to irrigated agriculture in the NSW Murray for over 60 years. It's a very important storage that takes full advantage of high-flows in the northern Basin, and frequently provides a critical alternative water source when inflows in the upper Murray are low.

We can't stress enough that history has ensured that Menindee is now fundamentally embedded into southern Basin river operations, and water sharing between NSW, Victoria and South Australia under the *Murray-Darling Basin Agreement*.

Effectively this means that any changes that are made at Menindee have the potential to negatively impact each state's bulk water share. For NSW, and for NSW Murray irrigators, this is especially critical given how the state's allocation system works.

The NSW Murray is a key source of annual crops, and essential food staples. These are produced by irrigators using a General Security licence. Under the NSW allocation framework, General Security licence holders only receive an allocation once all other higher priority needs have been met. If the NSW bulk share of Menindee is reduced or negatively changed in any way, General Security irrigators bear the full brunt of this impact. This directly undermines their contribution to Australia's national food security.

As such, the Murray Regional Strategy Group (MRSNG) does not support any proposed changes at Menindee that negatively impact allocations to NSW Murray irrigators.

We believe this principle is not just essential for consumptive users, but also the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH). The CEWH now owns 26%, or 433,823 ML, of the NSW Murray General Security entitlements on issue. The impacts we've described above for food producers will also undermine this part of the CEWH's portfolio.

Aligned with the above, MRSNG believes that a number of positive changes at Menindee have been overlooked by Basin Governments for far too long. These positive changes have the potential to benefit all licence holders whose allocations are tied to the active management of Menindee. We will outline these further on in this submission.

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<sup>1</sup> MDBA (2026), Menindee Lakes Review Technical Report, February 2026.  
<https://www.mdba.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/Menindee-Lakes-Review-Technical-Report.pdf>, p141.

## **Consultation.**

Going forward, it's vital the MDBA and Basin Governments formally acknowledge that the fate of a broad range of stakeholders is tied-up in the future of Menindee. It's important that they all be involved in the process of developing options for BOC's consideration, and have the ability to provide feedback on the final package that BOC will decide upon.

Related to this, consultation must not be on policy, operational, or infrastructure 'opportunities' alone. Detailed modelling must also be developed to support the MDBA's consultation as well. Stakeholders with a licence that's dependent upon the active management of Menindee must be able to understand – through modelled outcomes – what happens to their water access as a result of the decisions BOC may make.

Further, while MRSG believes there should be no negative impact on water access for individual licence holders, if this does occur as a result of changes at Menindee, these licence holders must be fully compensated. If necessary, an appropriate compensation package must be agreed as part of BOC's broader decisions about Menindee's future.

The rest of this submission outlines the 'opportunities' that MRSG would like to see modelled as part of the MDBA, and BOC's, future consultation on the Menindee Review.

## **Opportunities to be Modelled and Consulted Upon.**

### **1. Confirmation that No Further Water Recovery for the Environment is Needed.**

The Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) for the Lower Darling has been assessed as part of the MDBA's Basin Plan Review. This assessment indicates that the Lower Darling SDL may not represent an Ecologically Sustainable Level of Take (ESLT). Given the Commonwealth and NSW environmental water holders now own 85% of Lower Darling High Security and General Security entitlements, and 100% of Supplementary Licences, reducing this SDL further is clearly not the answer to improved environmental outcomes.

The focus instead needs to be on 'no impact'<sup>2</sup> operational changes at Menindee, and infrastructure to support this. Current infrastructure is old, and impedes fish passage. Some existing operational decisions also result in large volumes of inactive storage.

For example, repair and upgrade of the Pamamaroo Regulator would allow more effective and efficient environmental releases into the 40-kilometre long Lower Darling 'dead zone' between the Main Weir on Lake Wetherell, and the Menindee Outlet Regulator.

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<sup>2</sup> i.e. that pass MRSG's test of no negative impact on NSW Murray allocations.

Similarly, fish passage infrastructure past the Main Weir would allow the fish that congregate in the pool below the Weir to move upstream, and seek refuge from poor water quality when this is needed. We believe sufficient investment has been made in detailed case-studies for this solution. Pending the modelling and consultation we've recommended above, this solution is effectively shovel-ready.

More broadly, we also believe that 'no impact' infrastructure that provides for fish passage throughout the Lakes, alongside a dedicated and targeted campaign to eradicate carp, are the most effective solutions for improving native fish outcomes.

## **2. Maximising the Benefits of Water for the Environment.**

We recognise this is a key theme of the MDBA's Basin Plan Review.<sup>3</sup> We believe the following options would aid the MDBA in achieving this outcome, without negatively impacting on allocations to individual licence holders.

We note the Darling Anabranch is frequently used to deliver environmental water from Lake Cawndilla through to the Murray. We believe there's an opportunity to utilise this pathway to deliver consumptive water too.

Delivering consumptive water via the Darling Anabranch provides environmental services as it makes its way through the system. By attributing the associated losses to the CEWH's portfolio, the environment directly benefits from this watering event, without requiring the release of large volumes of held environmental water.

We further note the 80 GL of water that was previously owned by Tandou is now held by the CEWH. It is appropriate that the supply of this water should be via its original source, Lake Cawndilla. We provide an infrastructure opportunity that would facilitate this below.

This matters because presently, our understanding is that when this 80 GL is called upon, it's released from the top two Lakes into the Lower Darling. This is up to 80 GL that would otherwise be available to state bulk water rights under current sharing arrangements.

Connecting Cawndilla to the Lower Darling takes full advantage of what would otherwise be dead storage. It frees-up water in the top two Lakes to be used for other purposes.

We also think it's important that changes at Menindee with regard to held environmental water reflect the MDBA's principle of maximised benefits – without creating unintended negative impacts. We note a trial has been in place for some years, where environmental water recovered north of Menindee is shepherded through the Lakes and into the southern Basin. We understand NSW will create a retail product to recognise this water in Menindee. The characteristics of this product should maximise the environmental utility of this water, without negatively impacting the rights of existing licence holders.

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<sup>3</sup> [2026 Murray–Darling Basin Plan Review Discussion Paper](#), p. 37.

### **3. Infrastructure Opportunities.**

As noted above, we believe there's benefit in reconnecting Lake Cawndilla to the Lower Darling via existing infrastructure. The potential to refurbish the existing Pinnelco Channel to deliver dead storage from Cawndilla to the Lower Darling is worth exploring.

We understand Pinnelco Channel has a potential capacity of up to 3000 ML/day. If it was refurbished, it could be used to deliver otherwise inaccessible water in Lake Cawndilla into the Lower Darling. This would likely result in a significant evaporative loss saving at Cawndilla that also warrants modelling.

Given the expected impacts under future climate variability, we believe there's further significant value to be derived in exploring infrastructure opportunities that improve the water security benefits that Menindee already currently provides.

For example, we would support exploration of increasing the full supply level (FSL) at Lakes Menindee and Cawndilla. We see significant benefit in being able to store additional water in these Lakes during periods of high-inflows. This would help mitigate downstream flooding impacts, while also ensuring additional water supplies are available during any subsequent drier times.

### **4. Operational Opportunities.**

At the outset, it's important to note that Menindee is a storage scheme that is owned and operated by NSW. Related to this, the NSW Government has existing obligations related to the effective management of both flood events, and periods of low-inflow.

For low-inflow periods in particular, it will be critical that any changes made at Menindee do not impede the ability of NSW to meet its existing obligations, including to any licences that are connected to the storage.

Beyond this, recognising 30 years of environmental water recovery and 14 years of Basin Plan implementation, it's reasonable for Governments to assess the ongoing utility of Additional Dilution Flows (ADF), as specified under the *Murray-Darling Basin Agreement*.

Salinity is no longer an issue in the Murray River upstream of South Australia, and the existing volumetric triggers in Dartmouth, Hume and Menindee do not reflect contemporary water use across the southern Murray-Darling Basin.

Ideally, ADF would be removed completely. Alternatively, we recommend the following:

- All volumetric targets are replaced with a single salinity trigger.
- Conditions that activate and deactivate this trigger are clear and agreed.
- At a minimum, volumetric targets must recognise carryover in Dartmouth and Hume.

More broadly, we note the specific operational details of ADF are characterised in the *Objectives and Outcomes Document*, which is agreed between the MDBA and BOC. In this document, both the purpose and objective of ADF specify the need to balance: (i) mitigation of adverse water quality in South Australia; and (ii) maximising the availability of water to the southern Basin states.

We believe this already gives BOC some capacity to determine when it might be better to ‘switch ADF off’, in order to ensure water availability to NSW, Victoria and South Australia is maximised. We would like to see this interrogated in more detail as part of the current Menindee Review, complemented by modelling that shows when the ‘switching off’ of ADF might be the better alternative for all three southern Basin states.

Kind Regards,

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