

Understanding Water Allocation Planning In the Northern Territory

Water is one of the most fundamental and valued resources in the Northern Territory. It is vital for the wellbeing, prosperity and lifestyles enjoyed by many Territorians. It is also of critical importance to the health of the Northern Territory's pristine and delicate ecosystems. For these reasons, water allocation planning is crucial to ensure the sustainability of water resources.

Water in the NT is not in endless supply and therefore careful and thorough planning is required to ensure that the health of the river and groundwater systems is maintained for generations to come.

How Does this Process Relate to the NT *Water Act*?

Through the implementation of the *Water Act*, the Northern Territory Government is striving to achieve a sustainable balance between development and conservation so that residents, visitors and businesses can continue to enjoy the benefits derived from river and groundwater systems both today and tomorrow. The *NT Water Act* allows the enforceable allocation of water to various declared beneficial uses including; agriculture, aquaculture, public water supply, riparian and industry while ensuring that adequate provisions are made to maintain cultural and environmental requirements. This is done through the declaration of water allocation plans within water control districts, ensuring water is equitably managed to preserve quality of life and the integrity of the water dependent ecosystems in the region. Water control districts are geographical areas declared under the *Water Act* by the relevant Northern Territory Government Minister to allow for intensive management of water resources.

What are some of the Benefits of the Water Allocation Planning Process?

Some benefits of this process include:

- a transparent stakeholder driven plan that will protect environmental and human interests;
- secure water extraction licences for the duration of the water allocation plan;
- an assurance that licences to extract water will not be issued if they are deemed to have an
- unacceptable impact on other beneficial uses, especially the environment;
- establishment of a basis for the permanent trade of water from one user to another subject to
- various rules;
- protection of water related cultural values within the region; and
- protection of water dependent ecosystems within the region.

What are Water Allocation Plans?

A water allocation plan outlines how a particular water body (e.g. a river and/or an aquifer) is to be managed. They provide a blueprint for future sustainability by establishing a framework for sharing water between human and environmental needs as determined through reference to both community and technical groups. It sets limits to the availability of water assigned to each beneficial use, rules for managing licences and water trading. A critical component of any water allocation plan is how it will be monitored. Monitoring is important to assess the performance of a plan and to inform reviews.

Also included in these plans are:

- the basis for water allocation planning, climatic variability as well as the formulae's used to determine water allocations
- rules for the assessment of licences to take water assigned to various beneficial uses;

- limits to the availability of water;
- rules to enable water licences to be adjusted during times of severe climate variability;
- rules for managing licences to take water assigned to various beneficial use;
- rules for water trading;
- mandatory conditions for licences and permits issued under the *Water Act*; and
- monitoring programs to evaluate the performance of the plan and to inform a review.

When finalised, a water allocation plan has a maximum life of ten years and a maximum review period of five years. The review would draw on past experience and knowledge coupled with the outcomes of the monitoring program to establish how the plan may change and evolve to meet the needs of the future.

Why is Community Consultation Important?

The Northern Territory Government recognises that community values and beliefs are an integral component of the water allocation planning process. To ensure this, the community will have opportunities to be involved in developing water allocation plans on a number of occasions and at a range of levels ensuring an equitable and transparent process.

Water advisory committees are established and declared under the *Water Act*. to assist in providing advice to Government with regards to the management of water resources within a defined area. Information gathered and developed during the process is freely accessible and members of the public are encouraged to comment on the process and to make formal submissions before and after a draft plan is released. All submissions are considered and collated prior to the preparation of both the draft and final stages of the plan.

What Committees Exist?

Three water advisory committees are established and declared within the Northern Territory. These are the Rapid Creek Catchment Advisory Committee (RACCAC), the Ti-Tree Water Advisory Committee (TTWAC) and the Katherine Water Advisory Committee (KWAC). KWAC was established on 9 January 2007 by the Minister for Natural Resources, Environment and Heritage as a sub-committee of the Daly River Management Advisory Committee (DRMAC).

Water Advisory Committees and Water Allocation Plans for Darwin and Alice Springs will be established during 2008. It is important that the Northern Territory Government work with traditional owners, residents and commercial operators (with a vested interest in water) to monitor and share knowledge on water requirements and participate in the sustainable management and use of the resource for all parties.

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