



## **Response to the Southern Forests Irrigation Reference Group Recommendations**

### ***Minister for Regional Development and Minister for Water***

The State Government is committed to working with the community to develop practical and effective measures to help build water security for the Manjimup-Pemberton region. In October 2022, the State Government announced the formation of the Southern Forests Irrigation Reference Group (Reference Group) to advise on future water security options for the Manjimup-Pemberton horticultural industry.

The formation of the Reference Group followed the State Government's announcement that it was not proceeding with the Southern Forests Irrigation Scheme. This decision was the culmination of a range of considerations, including revised projections of water availability due to climate change, and concerns in the community about the project.

The State Government's funding commitment of \$15.3 million will be reserved to support water security measures into the future and the Reference Group's report will help shape allocation of this funding. The State will continue to work closely with the Commonwealth Government to explore future co-funding, noting the previously committed \$39.7 million was towards large scale water infrastructure.

The South West of Western Australia has experienced a marked drying trend in rainfall since 1970, particularly in autumn and early winter. The decline in this region has been larger than anywhere else in Australia. In addition, most water resource subareas in the Warren and Donnelly catchments are at or near their sustainable level of water allocation.

Future climate projections indicate rainfall will continue to decline into the future. Along with increasing temperature, this will lead to decreases in soil moisture and streamflow. This warmer and drier future presents landholders with both a challenge to maintain water security, and an opportunity to develop increased climate resilience.

The Reference Group was independently chaired by the former Department of Agriculture and Food Director General, Mr Ian Longson. Eight members, including Ms Jane Kelsbie, the MLA Member for Warren-Blackwood, were appointed from across the community to the Reference Group.

The Reference Group delivered its final report to the State Government on 10 February 2023. The Reference Group's final report makes 15 recommendations across eight areas, grouped under the three key objectives in its Terms of Reference (infrastructure; water use efficiency; and sustainable water policy).

In developing the report, the Reference Group met with variety of local stakeholders, and the final report provides a summary of their views on current and future water security in the region.

The Reference Group's work complements the role of the Warren Donnelly Water Advisory Committee, which provides an avenue for growers and the community to contribute and advise State Government on water planning and policy in the Warren-Donnelly catchments.

Following the Reference Group's commentary on the arrangements of the Committee, the State Government intends to appoint Ms Jane Kelsbie MLA, Member for Warren-Blackwood, as the new chair of the Warren Donnelly Water Advisory Committee.

The State Government thanks the Reference Group for the time and effort it has devoted in preparing its report. The State Government's responses to the Reference Group's final report and its recommendations, are as follows:

***Infrastructure: Shared water supply***

*Recommendation 1: Government funding and policy should enable growers to manage their own water security on-farm.*

The **State Government will consider** funding solutions that empower individual growers to drought proof their own operations.

The collective success of the Southern Forests horticultural industry is built on all landholders sustainably capturing water in on-stream storages over winter to irrigate crops over summer.

*Recommendation 2: Shared infrastructure proposals to improve water security within a subarea should be enabled and encouraged.*

The **State Government is supportive of** sustainable and cost-effective infrastructure proposals that could improve water security in the region. The transport and/or storage of water through communal or shared infrastructure can provide flexibility and help build collective water security, although there are sensitives within the community about the scale and equity of communal infrastructure.

Accordingly, the State Government will consider co-funding multi-proponent proposals which demonstrate increases in water security and provide benefits to the broader community. As with all proposals, they must be underpinned by appropriate science, including evidence to support regulatory approvals, which will consider the water needs of the environment.

### **Infrastructure: Monitoring**

*Recommendation 3: There is a requirement for increased capital and operating funding for stream measurement stations to improve the confidence in the catchment modelling and the timeliness of measurement information into the future.*

The **State Government supports** increasing the resolution of streamflow and catchment information where this is cost-effective.

The new Warren-Donnelly surface water allocation plan will include a review of monitoring in the Warren and Donnelly catchments. The review will consider improvements to, or new, monitoring to manage surface water effectively into the future (e.g. to improve data delivery or our understanding of the changing relationship between rainfall and streamflow generation in a drying climate).

The State Government is prepared to fund the capital costs of monitoring should the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation identify improvements that contribute to securing sustainable water resources for the future benefits of the horticulture industry and the community in the Manjimup and Pemberton districts.

As part of this, the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation will have to ensure the delivery of measurement activities is coordinated and prioritised with respect to the needs of Manjimup-Pemberton community and stream measurement priorities across Western Australia. The operating cost for the delivery of such monitoring in the Manjimup-Pemberton area will be a considered in the prioritisation process.

*Recommendation 4: Mechanisms to improve the engagement of growers and stakeholders in the observation and interpretation of monitoring data need to be developed.*

The **State Government supports** improving the engagement of growers and stakeholders in the scientifically robust observation and interpretation of monitoring data. Contemporary, best-practice flow measurement techniques are used by the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation's hydrographers, who are generally qualified by the nationally accredited diploma in hydrography, and are supported by the Department's quality assurance and standards protocols.

The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation will work with the Warren Donnelly Advisory Committee to identify opportunities to improve communication of what monitoring information is available, what it means, and how it is used to inform scientific studies and water resource management decisions.

The State Government notes there are also several avenues in which people can already assess monitoring information in the Warren-Donnelly catchments.

As identified by the Reference Group, monitoring information collected from the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation's streamflow (and groundwater) monitoring programs is available from its Water Information Reporting tool free of charge ([Water information reporting | Western Australian Government \(www.wa.gov.au\)](https://www.wa.gov.au)).

The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation's Healthy Rivers South-West program (<https://rivers.dwer.wa.gov.au/>) also provides information about the biology, water quality and habitat of our south-west rivers and their catchments, including the Warren and Donnelly catchments.

The Bureau of Meteorology also provides local scale climate and weather information ([Western Australia Weather and Warnings \(bom.gov.au\)](https://www.bom.gov.au)).

The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development also provides a range of online information, tools and calculators covering water management, land use, soils, climate and weather across the State.

#### ***Water use efficiency: Carry over***

*Recommendation 5: A carry over policy needs to be developed and implemented as soon as possible incorporating the allowance for on-farm dam infrastructure to carry over water from season to season.*

The **State Government** is investigating a water carry over policy. It is essential that the range of views on the value and use of water are included and considered before any decision on water carry over is made for on-stream dams in the Warren-Donnelly catchments. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation will work with the Warren Donnelly Water Advisory Committee, and local community to consider policy options as part of the new Warren-Donnelly surface water allocation plan.

The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, with the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation are investigating the potential benefits, challenges and opportunities for water carry over. This may allow growers in the Warren-Donnelly catchments to increase the capacity of existing dams to store unused water, for later use.

The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation has engaged an independent consultant to develop a discussion paper on water carry over for on-stream farm dams, with input from the Warren Donnelly Water Advisory Committee.

*Recommendation 6: Investment in metering, on-farm water measurement and bypass management will be necessary to ensure carry over can be implemented sustainably and compliance with associated enabling license conditions.*

The **State Government supports** cost-effective investment in metering and measurement equipment where it will assist in better water management practices. Such equipment will likely be required should a carry over policy be introduced along with increased monitoring and reporting requirements to ensure the dams do not capture more water than the annual licence volume.

***Water use efficiency: Measurement***

*Recommendation 7: Government subsidy schemes to incentivise water users and offset the cost of installing the requisite on-farm water measurement infrastructure are recommended to ensure a sustainable water supply for the horticulture industry and the environment.*

The **State Government will consider** funding schemes where they have a demonstrable public benefit. Accurate water measurement is an essential component of any modern irrigation district. As water becomes scarce, it will become increasingly important both at the farm and regional scale.

***Water use efficiency: On-farm efficiency***

*Recommendation 8: There is a continuing need for funding for the research and demonstration of water saving technologies relevant to the Warren and Donnelly catchments and how to integrate these into on-farm water management.*

The **State Government agrees** water savings and improving efficiencies will continue to be key areas of research and application in the future. The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development will continue to develop research programs and projects in collaboration with State and Commonwealth partners that lead to practical and cost effective on-farm solutions.

It was noted that the Reference Report indicates strong interest in establishing doppler radar capability for the region to assist with irrigation scheduling and other farm productivity benefits. The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development will explore this matter further, including consultations with technical experts and stakeholders to on whether a funding case can be developed.

### ***Water use efficiency: Trading and sharing water***

*Recommendation 9: The Warren Donnelly Water Advisory Committee should be briefed in order to understand the implications of new Water Reform Bill and be able to provide feedback on these issues and other issues of relevance to growers and the local community.*

The **State Government will consider** opportunities to brief the Warren Donnelly Water Advisory Committee on the proposed Bill when the drafting of the legislation has further progressed.

Following commentary in the report, the State Government is committed to strengthening the transparency of licence conditions through provisions that support the publication of licences and licence conditions in the new Water Reform Bill.

*Recommendation 10: Administrative rules should be revised to streamline trading of licences and agreements, particularly where they pose a low risk to the water resource.*

The **State Government supports** trades of water entitlements and agreements between willing participants. Trades and agreements are an effective means for optimising the benefits of using water, to individuals and the broader community. Unlike in the Murray-Darling Basin, in Western Australia only land holders and occupiers of the land can participate in trades and agreements.

The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, on behalf of the State Government, issue water licences and permits in accordance with the *Rights in Water and Irrigation Act 1914* to protect the state's water resources and promote the sustainable and efficient use of water. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation's role in assessing trades and agreements is to ensure there are no significant impacts to other users of the water resource or the environment.

In developing the new Warren-Donnelly surface water allocation plan, the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation will consider how it can improve administrative rules and communication about how trades and agreements can be an effective water security tool.

*Recommendation 11: Enable local farm-to-farm infrastructure mechanisms for enhancing water trading.*

The **State Government supports** individuals exploring local farm-to-farm infrastructure to improve opportunities for trading.

Local farm-to-farm infrastructure is a practical and efficient way of transporting water, however, it is private infrastructure and costs need to be met by private beneficiaries.

### ***Sustainable water policy: Availability of additional water***

*Recommendation 12: The new Warren Donnelly Surface Water Allocation Plan needs to be expedited based on science and extensive stakeholder consultation.*

The **State Government** is replacing the *2012 Warren-Donnelly surface water allocation plan* to address the challenges of climate change.

The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation has begun this work. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation has evaluated how well the plan's objectives are being met, and if they will be met under future climate change. An evaluation statement will be published this year; it will outline what work has been done and will be done to replace the plan.

The new Warren-Donnelly surface water allocation plan will be informed by consultation and inclusion of Traditional Owner knowledge, as well as contemporary science, including the Bureau of Meteorology's latest climate change projections and recent streamflow monitoring.

The State Government notes that the Reference Group report raised several water policy matters. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation will be presenting these matters to the Warren Donnelly Water Advisory Committee for review and further work.

Some of these matters will be addressed in the upcoming evaluation statement or considered in the new Warren-Donnelly surface water allocation plan. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation has commenced conversations with stakeholders as part of the new plan's development. Consultation will be ongoing with key stakeholder groups including Traditional Owners, the horticultural industry, licensees, environmental groups, recreational groups, the local community and other government agencies.

*Recommendation 13: No additional large-scale volumes of water should be made available until the new Warren Donnelly Surface Water Allocation Plan has been finalised.*

The **State Government** notes any application for water must satisfy an assessment under the *Rights in Water and Irrigation Act 1914*. Most agricultural subareas in the Warren-Donnelly catchments are fully allocated through the development of on-stream farm dams, leaving limited water available for further licensing.

### ***Sustainable water policy: Forestry management***

*Recommendation 14: When developing land use and water management legislation, plans and policies, consideration should be given to minimise the impact on stream flow and water availability.*

The **State Government agrees** that future planning and policies should consider land use and climate interactions to inform water availability.

*Recommendation 15: Reinstate flow monitoring on Record Brook, and other streams as required, to define the impact of climate and forest management, improve understanding of run off processes and test potential treatments like ecological thinning.*

The **State Government recognises** that long term measurement is crucial in understanding the impacts of climate change in the region.

Reduced rainfall has led to lower water tables and diminishing flow in streams. To understand these changes and inform forest management, the State Government has reinstated stream gauge monitoring in key forested experimental catchments. This data will assist with implementation of the Forest Management Plan by informing practices such as ecological thinning.

The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation has reinstated two monitoring sites in the Donnelly River catchment to collect surface water and groundwater information from forested catchments. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation will continue to operate these sites and a broader monitoring network to collect observations on changing flows under climate change and land use changes. The need for further changes or additions to the monitoring network will be determined through the water allocation planning processes which are already underway.



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