



Managing water in and around Adelaide River

Frequently asked questions

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A water plan for the Adelaide River catchment

A **water allocation plan** (water plan) is being developed for the Adelaide River catchment. This will be the first plan for the catchment and will be completed by mid 2026. A plan can be in place for up to 10 years, and must be reviewed within 5 years after commencement.

The water plan will:

- be informed by science
- be developed with the community
- ensure the Adelaide River remains a free flowing river
- maintain environmental and cultural values
- preserve our Territory lifestyle.

The Department of Lands, Planning and Environment's Water Resources Division is developing the plan.

Where is the Adelaide River catchment?

The Adelaide River catchment is approximately 50km east of Darwin. It covers the length of the Adelaide River from its headwaters in Litchfield National Park to the coastal plains of the Arafura Sea.

The catchment covers 7,640km² and includes all the creeks and rivers within the catchment area. This includes the Margaret River, Burrell Creek and Howley Creek.



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What is a water allocation plan?

A water plan identifies how water is shared for the benefit of the Territory. It specifies the volume of water that can be taken from a water resource and allocates that water amongst users. It sets the objectives for water sharing and a process for monitoring, reviewing and adjusting the plan.

The Adelaide River water plan will consider:

1. maintaining the health of the environment
2. social and recreational needs and values
3. Aboriginal cultural sites and water-related cultural values
4. drinking water and water for other domestic uses
5. Aboriginal economic development
6. needs of other users including agriculture, aquaculture, and industry (such as mining).

It's about finding a balance to maximise the environmental, social, cultural and economic benefits of using our local water resources.

You can read more about how water is managed in the NT via nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1456644/water-resource-management-statement-managing-water-in-the-territory.pdf.



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How is the community involved in developing the plan?

A water advisory committee of 15 local members was appointed in July 2024. Committee members represent interests in the catchment including agriculture, horticulture, tourism, fishing, conservation and community values.

The committee is the first water committee in the Territory to have a majority Aboriginal membership.

The committee has been appointed for 4 years and will provide advice to the Minister on the development and implementation of the plan. Progress of the committee is available online. The public will be invited to review and comment on the draft plan in late 2025.

You can find more information about the water committee via environment.nt.gov.au/boards-committees/water-advisory-committees/darwin-rural-adelaide-river-water-advisory-committee.



How are Aboriginal interests represented?

The water plan will take into account the cultural values of Aboriginal people in the catchment and their economic interests.

A majority of members on the Adelaide River water advisory committee are Aboriginal and the committee will provide advice to the Minister on the plan.

In addition to the committee, the Water Resources Division has partnered with the Northern Land Council to engage with local Aboriginal groups including Larrakia, Wulna, Warrai and Kungarakana to identify cultural values to be protected.

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What is an Aboriginal water reserve?

All water allocation plans have what's called an Aboriginal water reserve. The reserves are an allocated amount of water to support Aboriginal economic development. The amount included in the Aboriginal water reserve is only accessible to eligible Aboriginal people and is informed by how much Aboriginal land has access to water in the catchment area.

You can read more about Aboriginal water reserves via nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-allocation/aboriginal-water-reserves.

Who is involved?

The Northern Territory Minister for Water Resources is responsible for water planning in the Territory. The Water Resources Division supports the development of the individual water allocation plans for the Minister's review and approval.

The Minister has appointed an independent Controller of Water Resources who is responsible for making licence and permit decisions and for compliance and enforcement.

You can read more about the Controller of Water Resources via nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-controller.

How is water regulated in the catchment now?

Water taken for rural stock and domestic consumption is exempt from licensing, as is groundwater taken in quantities of less than 5 megalitres per year.

The Darwin Rural Water Control District was extended in July 2024 to include the Adelaide River catchment, increasing regulatory requirements. You need a licence or permit for water activities within this district. This includes water extraction licences to take surface and groundwater for commercial use and permits to construct a bore.

You can read more about the Darwin Rural Water Control District via nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-control-districts/darwin-rural.

You can find out more about the existing framework and policy via youtube.com/watch?v=ksv0nnnaC5M and nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-allocation/water-allocation-framework.

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Is this the same thing as AROWS?

The Adelaide River Off-stream Water Storage Project (AROWS) is an individual water supply project separate to the Adelaide River Water Allocation Plan.

The water plan is a whole of catchment strategy, but it will also inform the potential water availability for AROWS and other water-based industries or developments that may arise in the future, e.g. agriculture or aquaculture.

The Department of Logistics and Infrastructure is delivering AROWS in collaboration with Power and Water as part of the Darwin Region Water Supply Infrastructure Program. Currently this involves planning and designing the project's infrastructure, engaging with stakeholders and the community and getting necessary approvals.

The NT Environment Protection Authority is responsible for assessing potentially significant environmental impacts of the AROWS project.

You can read more about the AROWS project via infrastructure.nt.gov.au/project.

Will government put dams in the catchment area?

The Adelaide River is a free-flowing river. The NT has the highest number of free-flowing rivers in the tropical world and the NT Government is committed to keeping it this way.

Why does the government want water from Adelaide River?

More water is needed to ensure a safe, reliable and sustainable water supply for the Greater Darwin region's future water needs.

A detailed business case identified returning Manton Dam to service and building the Adelaide River Off-stream Water Storage (AROWS) as the best options to secure Darwin's future water supply.

The water plan is not just about water for potential water storages. The water plan will create a framework for all uses of water in the catchment area.

For more information on the Darwin Region Water Supply program visit watersecurity.nt.gov.au/darwin-region-water-supply.

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Will the plan give AROWS approval to take water?

No, the plan will not give AROWS approval to take water. The water plan will say how much water is allowed to be taken from water bodies in the Adelaide River catchment by setting allocations.

Allocations are the amount of water that is available for different uses. They help manage competing demands. An allocation does not give anyone a right to take water.

After the plan is declared a water licensing process will be needed for AROWS to get a right to take water from within an allocation. This process will take into account the water plan and other project specific information like the findings of the AROWS Environmental Impact Assessment.

Water licences are decided by the independent Controller of Water Resources.



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How will the Adelaide River water allocation plan be developed?

A program of research is already underway to better understand the Adelaide River catchment. A water advisory committee has also been established to provide input on the environmental, social and cultural values associated with the research. Both of these will inform a draft plan.

A draft plan will be released for public consultation in late 2025 to ensure the community has the opportunity to have a say. After consultation the plan will be updated and submitted to the Minister for a decision in mid 2026.

The plan will be developed in accordance with:

- legislative requirements of the NT Water Act 1992
- national guidelines for water planning and management under the National Water Initiative
- strategic priorities of the Territory Water Plan ([Territory Water Plan](#))
- other NT Government water policies.

Is there science to support the plan?

The Water Resources Division has been monitoring water in the Adelaide River catchment since 1952. Funding for the plan was secured in 2022, accelerating water science and other research for the area including:

- technical review of more than 70 years of catchment water data
- ecosystem and terrestrial mapping
- biodiversity surveys and eDNA sampling
- water quality and sediment testing
- hydrodynamic modelling
- cultural values mapping.

Research is collaborative and includes input from the CSIRO, Charles Darwin University, government's Flora and Fauna Division, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory and local consultants.

A Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) will provide advice to ensure risks have been identified and management actions are appropriate.

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What's special about Adelaide River?

The Adelaide River catchment holds significant cultural, ecological and social value for local communities including Traditional Owners, Aboriginal people, landholders, pastoralists, conservationists, fishing enthusiasts and other stakeholders. The Adelaide River floodplains are recognised Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) of national and international significance. KBAs are places of global significance for conservation of birds and other wildlife.

Community values highlighted during workshops include:

- importance of the natural environment
- sustainability of water resources
- culture and spiritual values
- recreation and tourism
- food security
- economic opportunities
- sense of belonging.

Values mapping work is continuing in 2025.

Keep up to date

Our dedicated Adelaide River catchment water allocation plan web page will be updated as the plan progresses. Visit nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-control-districts/darwin-rural/adelaide-river-catchment-water-allocation-plan.

Email: WaterResources.DEPWS@nt.gov.au to be added to our mail out list.

Sign up: Finding the Balance environment.nt.gov.au/consultations-decisions-policies/finding-the-balance-sign-up.

Register: haveyoursay.nt.gov.au.