

The progress towards engaging Territorians

Improving water planning

Document title	The progress towards engaging Territorians
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Approved by	Executive Director Water Resource Division
Date approved	March 2025
TRM number	

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1. Independent review of the Northern Territory water planning processes

In January 2025, Watertrust Australia Ltd published a report '[Lessons Learned: Collaborative water allocation planning in the Northern Territory](#)'. The report was developed at the invitation of the Western Davenport and Ti Tree water advisory committee (the committee) and the Department of Lands, Planning and Environment (the department).

The report outlines the lessons learned and an exploration of possible water planning improvements with direct as well as wider regional relevance based on the reflections of the committee and the department in the period from May to July 2024, using the 2021-2024 Western Davenport water allocation planning process as a case study.

The report offers short term improvements that can be implemented within current Northern Territory policy and legislative settings and future directions that are long-term and may require a shift in the approach to, and resourcing of, water planning processes. The future directions acknowledge that good water management requires a commitment to continual learning and adjustment in collaboration with stakeholders.

As part of the continuous improvement of community involvement in water planning, the department has defined several actions that have been, and will be, implemented. The department actions are aligned to the reports four areas of the planning and engagement processes:

1. Water advisory committee establishment and functions
2. Water advisory committee members
3. Water advisory committee influence and transparency
4. Water advisory committee wider context

It is acknowledged that each of the actions interact and support one another and are consistent with continuous improvement. The department has focused efforts on those that provide the most benefit at this stage. The key improvements in the short-term are:

- Water Resource management statement – Engaging Territorians
- Water Resource management statement - Managing water in the Territory
- Water advisory committee terms of reference
- [Northern Territory Government water website](#) and improved information sharing
- Annual status of the resource reports

2. Department actions for continuous improvement

2.1. Water advisory committee establishment and functions

The report identified the need to develop a water planning procedure, a policy and legislative framework for effective engagement in planning processes. It also recognised the need for increased water advisory committee influence on the water planning process, aligning policy and licensing against objectives described in a plan and embedding committees into a wider planning structure.

The report proposed that an executive officer be established to be directed by the chair, however, such resourcing is not provided for comparably more independent roles, such as the Controller of Water Resources and is not possible within the current resourcing allocations to the department. Alternatively, the department has standardised documentation and administrative processes to improve efficiency and consistency of interactions with the department across the Northern Territory (the Territory).

In response to the identified need for further transparency and guidance on water planning and participation, the department has recently published online [Water Resource Management statements](#). These documents describe how water resources are managed in the Territory and how the community can participate in water resource management.

2.1.1. Water resource management statement – Engaging Territorians

In April 2025, the department published the '[Engaging Territorians](#)' water resource management statement.

The statement recognises that effective engagement is the keystone of contemporary water resource management and, in accordance with Northern Territory Government policy engagement activities, adopts the International Association for Public Participation model (IAP2 Spectrum). The statement outlines when different engagement mechanisms are used, including water advisory committees, peak bodies and interest groups and public forums.

2.1.2. Water resource management statement - Managing water in the Territory

In October 2024, the department published the '[Managing water in the Territory](#)' water resource management statement. The statement provides an overview of the roles and responsibilities for managing water in the Territory as defined by the *Water Act 1992*. It defines the principles for water sharing and describes how resource management activities are focused proportional to impact and risk while also highlighting the legislative and policy tools used to manage the Territory's water resources.

The statement includes the Northern Territory Water allocation planning framework and how more sophisticated, resource intensive controls are used to manage complex opportunities and risks. This proportional approach is a continuum of data collection, knowledge building and adaptive management. The statement provides details on all tools that are used to manage the resource, including those beyond the planning process to ensure planning is in the context of other supporting mechanisms and processes.

2.2. Water advisory committee members

The report identified the need to clarify roles and responsibilities of the committee, including the chair, members and the department, and proposed that committee terms of reference be revised to require committee members act as a conduit for wider community engagement in the planning process and that committee deliberations are made more transparent. The report also reinforced the importance of the role of the chair and how this may be improved through more transparent processes. However, the department has focused initially on the definition of the role of the chair rather than progressing more complex chair selection procedures.

In response, the department has revised the terms of reference to set the principles for the formation, operation and management of water advisory committees (committees). These are established to provide advice to the Minister to develop and implement water allocation plans in the Territory.

2.2.1. Water advisory committee terms of reference

During 2024 the revised terms of reference was released with the expressions of interest for the water advisory committee for Adelaide River and Daly River. This will be used consistently for establishing future committees.

The terms of reference defines the primary objectives of the committee to ensure alignment with water resource management, and outlines the structure, roles and responsibilities of the committee to ensure effective governance, accountability, and transparency in decision-making processes. It promotes inclusive and active engagement to leverage expertise, resources, knowledge, and holistic and integrated planning outcomes while supporting best practice water resource management, including continuous improvement.

Effective Aboriginal representation and participation was defined as a priority for the Territory and the terms of reference provides for a more flexible committee membership composition (maximum of 20 members) to facilitate strong local and Aboriginal representation. This is reflected in the membership of the recently formed Adelaide River water advisory committee, which has a majority of Aboriginal members. How Aboriginal members are nominated and selected for the committee is flexible in response to the region and the preferred processes.

2.3. Water advisory committee influence and transparency

The report identified the opportunity to enhance the link between committee advice and decision-making and how information and knowledge is shared, and how this relates to confidentiality and conflicts of interest in the small operating context of the Territory. The report identifies the use of a decision charter to guide the short- and long-term improvements. It also proposes that information is made publicly available wherever possible, and that the department develops better methods for sharing information.

In response to the need for transparency, the department has more clearly defined the advisory role of the committee to the Minister through the water advisory committee terms of reference rather than a separate decision charter process. The committee terms of reference also clarifies that the planning process is public, and committee members are encouraged to communicate with stakeholders and the broader community. It also recognises that as a representative committee, members will necessarily have an interest in committee deliberations. Consequently, potential and perceived conflicts of interest are inherent in committee membership and processes, especially in a small context of the Territory. The [Northern Territory Government water website](#) is being used as the primary mechanism to make information more transparent.

2.3.1. Northern Territory Government water website

Over the last couple of years, the [government's water website](#) has been redesigned to make information more transparent and material is progressively being updated to make it easier to understand. This clarifies water resource management in four main themes:

- management and security: how water is managed, the controller, control districts, plans and committees
- licensing and permits: how to apply, rules and responsibilities for licence and permit holders, including all water extraction licenses and reasons for decisions on the licensing portal
- water and ecosystems: learn about our water sources, water quality, aquatic plants and animals monitoring, including results of department water monitoring available on water data portal and links to more than 2,000 technical reports on [Territory Stories](#)

- water quality and supply: testing, collecting, saving water and keeping it safe to use, and linking to other parts of government and Power and Water Service delivery responsibilities.

Current active committees, membership and meeting summaries are published. This provides the balance between making committee deliberation transparent and enabling committee process discussions to provide valuable input into the planning processes.

The department is committed to continuing to improve our information and knowledge, which was identified as part of the water planning process. These include a focus on using skilled communicators to present technical material, the use of videos with versions in English and Kriol and on-Country visits to aid visualisation. A 3D model of the Adelaide River is being prepared to assist understanding of the natural river flow behaviour and the potential impact from water-take under the plan. The department is providing regular information sessions to committee members' extended families, the community and stakeholder groups who have an interest in plans. It is also regularly posting social media content to increase awareness of activities underway to inform water planning.

2.4. Water advisory committee wider context

The report proposed that committee participation be incorporated into the full planning cycle, above and beyond the development and review of plans. The term of appointment for a committee is up to four years and defines the differing roles of the committee throughout the planning life cycle.

The report also identified that the department publishes an annual evaluation of progress against a plan's implementation actions. In response to work across all plan areas, the department has started publishing status reports over recent years.

2.4.1. State of the water resource reports

Starting in 2023 (using data from the 2022-2023 financial year) Water Resources has begun providing an annual public water resource reports for declared plan areas as a new key performance indicator. These status reports are being developed for all plan areas to provide an annual snapshot of resource condition and management activities specific to the area.

As this was a new performance measure, reporting for declared plan areas was set progressively:

- 2023: 50% declared plan areas
- 2024: 80% declared plan areas
- 2025: 90% declared plan areas.

To date the department has published state of the resource reports for Alice Springs, Berry Springs, Katherine, Ooloo, Ti Tree and Western Davenport declared plan areas. Further reports under development for declared plan areas include Georgina Wiso, for release for 2024-2025, and Mataranka, for release in 2025. These reports provide information about the status of the water resource, how water is shared and used, and the activities undertaken to manage water during the reporting period. They also outline the key priorities for the future as identified in the implementation actions.

These reports, along with other tools provided through the website, demonstrate how the department is progressively developing tools to better communicate water resource information. It is acknowledged that the science that informs a water allocation plan is highly complex with technical reports provided by department subject matter experts, consultants and other scientific institutions including CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology and Geoscience Australia.

3. Reference

International Association for Public Participation model applies the (IAP2 Spectrum):

<https://iap2.org.au/resources/spectrum/>

Territory Stories (platform that houses Water Resources Division technical reports):

<https://digitalnt.nt.gov.au/>

Water Act 1992: <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/WATER-ACT-1992>

Watertrust Australia Ltd report Lessons Learned: Collaborative water allocation planning in the Northern Territory: <https://watertrustaustralia.org.au/initiative-publications>

Northern Territory Government water website: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water>

- Engaging Territorians: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-policies-and-guidelines>
- Managing water in the Territory: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-policies-and-guidelines>
- water advisory committees: <https://environment.nt.gov.au/boards-committees/water-advisory-committees>
- water allocation plans: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-allocation-plans>
- water allocation planning framework: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-policies-and-guidelines>
- water control districts: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-control-districts>
- water controller: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-controller>
- water data portal: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/water-in-the-nt/water-data-portal>
- water licensing portal: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/licensing/licensing-portal>
- water management: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-management>
- water planning process: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-management/national-water-initiative/water-planning-process>