

TERRITORY WATER PLAN



Annual progress report 2024

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Office of Water Security
✉ watersecurity.ntg@nt.gov.au
🏠 watersecurity.nt.gov.au



The Northern Territory Government respectfully and proudly acknowledges the Northern Territory's Aboriginal people and their rich cultures. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge Aboriginal peoples as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the lands and waters that we rely on for our livelihoods. We recognise the intrinsic connection of Traditional Owners to Country and value their ongoing contribution to managing the lands and waters. We support the need for genuine and lasting partnerships with Traditional Owners to better understand cultural connections, and we will work to establish lasting partnerships to manage water together, now and into the future.



Maningrida Water Supply Upgrade works underway.




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Purpose



This report outlines the Northern Territory (NT) Government's first year of progress (2023-2024) implementing the Territory Water Plan and its priority actions.

Context



Published in June 2023, the Territory Water Plan (the plan) is a whole-of-government initiative to deliver water security for all Territorians, now and into the future.

The plan is the first of its kind in the NT. It provides a lasting strategic framework for the NT Government and partners. Water security is the core principle and lens to guide reform efforts and is defined as ***'having an acceptable quantity and quality of water for people, economic opportunities, cultural and environmental needs, now and into the future.'***

Over two years, the Office of Water Security in the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security led the development of the plan. This was done in collaboration with NT Government agencies and Power and Water Corporation (Power and Water), consulting with the community, representatives from Aboriginal peak bodies, private sector, groups and water users.

The plan responds to the community's aspirations for water management, water security challenges and opportunities for the NT. It identifies four priority areas and long-term outcomes:

1. SAFETY

2. SUPPLY

3. SUSTAINABILITY

4. TRUST and CONFIDENCE

To set the foundations to achieve the strategic priorities and outcomes the plan identifies 16 priority actions the NT Government has started to deliver in the short term, over 3 years (from 2023 to 2026).

The mix of priority actions aim to improve water security across the NT from our capital, to our towns and most remote communities and homelands. This includes supporting the aspirations to sustainably grow the economy to \$40 billion by 2030, whilst managing the NT's environmental and cultural water requirements in a sustainably conscious and just way.



Highlights from 2023-2024




- ✓ Since 2021, the Australian and Northern Territory Governments have committed to co-investing more than \$440 million in [National Water Grid Authority \(NWGA\)](#) projects to give NT communities better access to clean, safe and reliable water. The Northern Territory was the first jurisdiction in Australia to be awarded funding for remote water infrastructure under the NWGA's expanded remit and focus on water security for First Nations communities. In 2023-2024, more than \$84 million was committed by both governments for 8 new projects, including:
 - \$59.7 million to enable much needed water infrastructure improvements at [Yuendumu](#), [Milingimbi](#), [Numbulwar](#), [Maningrida](#), and [Gove Peninsula](#) (Yirrkala and Gunyangara). These projects will ensure clean, reliable water is delivered to Aboriginal Territorians, improve water security issues to unlock new housing, community growth and government service delivery, and create construction jobs and opportunities for local businesses and suppliers.
 - \$23.2 million for a package of construction projects at [Yulara](#) to increase the capacity, long-term security and sustainability of the township's water supply. Yulara is the primary service centre for the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and the wider Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (Western Desert) regions. Water supply upgrades are essential for the growth of the town and tourism industry in the region. The package includes a bore and rising main, new water treatment compound, two 2ML water tanks and a new water treatment plant, and will be delivered during the next 5 years.
 - \$1.5 million for two science projects to improve modelling of water resources in the NT and enable the NT Government to build on its long-standing program of water research to support natural resource management. The Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security will deliver the [LiDAR survey and Digital Elevation Model development for NT river and aquifer systems](#) (\$0.89 million for Phase 2) and the [Recalibration of Models in High Demand Water Systems](#) (\$0.61 million for Phase 2).
- ✓ Power and Water and Clean TeQ Water won the [Infrastructure Project Innovation Regional Award for the Laramba Water Treatment Plant](#) at the 2024 Australian Water Awards.
- ✓ NT Health commenced drafting the [Safe Drinking Water Bill](#), which will support the NT Government and drinking water providers with risk-based management of public drinking water quality across the NT. Initial work has included a draft of the bill and workshops with stakeholders.
- ✓ The [Darwin Region Water Supply Program](#) has continued to meet key milestones. Construction to return Manton Dam to service is due to commence in the second half of 2024. Once returned to service, Manton Dam will provide an additional 7,300 megalitres a year into the Darwin region water supply system. This will help meet forecast demand and provide water security that enables future economic development. Manton Dam will continue to be open for recreational use by the community. Power and Water will apply additional treatment measures to ensure the water supplied meets stringent drinking water quality standards. This includes the construction of the Strauss Water Treatment Plant (Stage 1).

- ✓ Construction of the new Darwin River Dam pump station, which will improve the reliability of water supply to the Darwin region, reached its halfway mark with the completion of the main pump hall. The new pump station to be finished in 2025 will be hydraulically and economically more efficient during the Dry Season and at other times when higher flows are experienced.
- ✓ Introduced and passed amendments to the Water Act 1992 to support the independent appointment of a Controller of Water Resources to provide clear separation of responsibilities between the Minister, the Controller and authorised officers. The amendments also provide for decisions under the Water Act to be reviewed through the Northern Territory Civil and Administrative Tribunal.
- ✓ The [Georgina Wiso water allocation plan 2023-2031](#) was declared, and the draft [Mataranka water allocation plan 2024-2034](#) was released for public consultation.
- ✓ The [Surface water take – wet season flows policy](#) and Interference with a waterway guideline were released, providing clear guidance to industry on the extraction limits and rules for how water from wet season river flows in the Top End can be extracted to ensure responsible and sustainable economic development.
- ✓ Annual Status of the Water Resource Reports are progressively being published where water allocation plans are in place. Starting with Berry Springs, Katherine and Western Davenport the reports provide greater transparency and public understanding of water resource management in the NT.
- ✓ The NT Government recovers [unused licensed water entitlements](#) to ensure water is used for economic benefit in water allocation plan areas where demand for water is highest. Currently, the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security is applying this policy in high demand water resources.
- ✓ With Power and Water’s guidance, the NT Government is leading the way to reduce its water use in the Darwin region. A Government demand management strategy is being prepared, and water savings are already being found for some agencies.
- ✓ Power and Water started working with 21 Department of Education schools to reduce water usage as part of the 2024 Schools Water Efficiency Program. School participation to date has been very positive and a phenomenal 120 kilolitres of water per day is now being saved. In many cases, a simple change to best practice irrigation scheduling is all it has taken to achieve some big results. Improving water efficiency has also led to reduced water bills. The schools have been able to save up to \$268 per day, and deliver generational value in improved water stewardship by educating students in water awareness.
- ✓ A Remote Essential Services Working Group has been formed with members from the Land Councils, Aboriginal peak bodies and government departments. The purpose of the group is to address action 9B in the [NT Government Closing the Gap Implementation Plan](#), which commits to remote communities receiving essential services that meet or exceed the relevant jurisdictional standards by 2031.
- ✓ The Territory Water Plan was recognised for its transformative potential for water in the NT, winning the [Organisational Excellence Award at the Australian Water Association’s NT Water Awards](#).
- ✓ The NT Government has committed \$2 million to improve water security for Tjoritja / West MacDonnell National Park. Water availability challenges have been limiting tourism and recreation opportunities in and around the park. This project will explore options for innovative solutions to secure sustainable water to support Aboriginal business, living on Country opportunities and Traditional Owner joint management of this popular park.

Progress on priority actions 2023-2024

This section outlines the progress made in the first year of the plan.

The plan includes 16 priority actions the NT Government will deliver over the short term from 2023-2024 to 2025-2026. The priority actions contribute to multiple priority areas and outcomes. The numbers beside each action match the action to the priority areas it contributes to.

Priority action	Commitment	Delivery agencies	Priority areas
1. Safe drinking water legislation	By 2024, NT Government will introduce safe drinking water legislation	Department of Health	
2. Securing Darwin's future water supply	The NT Government will secure Darwin's future water supply through: Working closely with Power and Water to deliver the Manton Dam Return to Service project in 2026. Accelerating pre-construction activities of the Adelaide River Off-stream Water Storage (AROWS) project.	Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics Power and Water	
3. Improved water security for remote communities	Starting in 2023, the NT Government will deliver water information forums in priority communities. By 2024, the NT Government will develop and publish a regional and remote community water infrastructure priority list and continue the capital investment in remote community water infrastructure. The NT Government will partner with the National Water Grid Authority for remote and regional water assessment and infrastructure to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> accelerate the delivery of the infrastructure priority list in remote communities support water efficiency and innovation in remote communities and Homelands. 	Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities Power and Water Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security Department of Health Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics	

Manton Dam

Progress update

Status

Drafting has started on the Safe Drinking Water Bill, which is on track to be introduced to the Legislative Assembly by the end of 2024. A review of other state and NT drinking water laws has been used to inform the drafting. NT Health is now engaging with drinking water providers and peak Aboriginal organisations to receive feedback on the Bill as it is drafted.

On track

Manton Dam return to service

Power and Water is on track to commence construction of the Manton Dam Return to Service project in 2024, for completion in 2026. Planning and approvals processes to prepare the project for construction have been completed and contracts have been awarded. NT company Exact Contracting Pty Ltd has been awarded \$134 million to complete the design and construction of the project. An environmental referral to the NT Environment Protection Authority was submitted, and it was advised that the project did not pose significant impacts to the environment.

On track

AROWS pre-construction

The AROWS project is in a planning and approvals phase, which focuses on securing regulatory approvals, completing the concept design and engaging with the community during the next two years.

Engagement has included direct briefings to stakeholders and landowners as well as grassroots engagement through stalls at community events and shopping centres in the Darwin region.

The NT Government has begun consulting with relevant Aboriginal groups to ensure there is proper engagement for the project.

An Authority Certificate for the planning and approvals phase has been issued. The NT Government and Power and Water will continue to work closely with the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority and custodians to ensure that Sacred Sites are protected in planning for the project.

GHD Pty Ltd has been engaged to complete the Environmental Impact Assessment for the project.

SMEC Australia has been engaged to complete the concept design for the project, which will be finished in 2025.

A cross-agency Remote Water Team has been established to develop a community engagement program to share information about water supplies, water quality, water security and infrastructure investment in remote Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal Peak organisations who want to know more about their water.






On track

As of April 2024, community visits to 11 priority communities including Ali Curung, Finke, Gunyangara, Hermmansburg, Nauiyu, Maningrida, Numbulwar, Titjikala, Yirrkala, Yuendumu and Yuelamu have been undertaken. In the next year, there will be more community engagement in partnership with regional community organisations and Aboriginal peak bodies.

Power and Water has existing knowledge of infrastructure status, water source security and water quality, and is working on developing a prioritised infrastructure list.

Power and Water and the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics have commenced infrastructure assessments for 25 remote communities to better understand options for investment and improvement.

Since funding for First Nations water infrastructure projects was made available by the Commonwealth Government in 2023, five NWGA projects have been approved for Milingimbi, Yuendumu, Maningrida, Numbulwar and the Gove Peninsula (Yirrkala and Gunyangara), combining \$37.7 million of Commonwealth Government funding with \$22 million contributions from the NT Government.

Priority action	Commitment	Delivery agencies	Priority areas
4. Improved water outcomes for homelands	Starting in 2023, the NT Government will deliver a program to build the capacity of water service providers in Aboriginal homelands	Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities	
5. Government leadership on water efficiency	By 2024, the NT Government will deliver a water demand management strategy for the government sector in the Northern Territory.	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security Power and Water	
6. Putting a value on water	By 2023, the NT Government will implement a water charging framework for licenced users through: - Annual charges on granted water licence entitlements. - Administrative fees for licences and permits.	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security	
7. Territory voices in water security	By 2024, the NT Government will establish a Strategic Water Advisory Council to ensure Territorians have a voice on strategic water issues.	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security	
8. Enhancing Aboriginal participation in water management	By 2024, the NT Government will establish an Aboriginal Water Advisory Council to advise the NT Government on strategic water issues.	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security	

Water irrigation test: George Brown Botanic Gardens, Darwin, , Garramilla

Progress update	Status
<p>The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities provides grant funding to 38 service providers to deliver housing, municipal and essential services to around 400 eligible homelands. This includes the repairs and maintenance of bores and other water infrastructure. Current contracts will expire 30 June 2025.</p> <p>The department has commenced negotiations with independent NT based remote water specialists to develop a homelands water management service model, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • water management plans • community education resources • technical advice for service providers • sector training and support <p>The development of a homeland service model will be guided by land councils and Aboriginal Housing NT, with a goal to introduce the model in line with new contracts commencing 1 July 2025.</p>	<p><i>On track</i></p>
<p>A Water Demand Management Strategy is being developed and will aim to improve how NT Government uses water. It will initially set a water efficiency target for government operations in the greater Darwin region. The target will be achieved by agencies developing their own water efficiency plans. The departments of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics; Education; Environment, Parks and Water Security; and Power and Water will be the first to develop plans by the end of 2024.</p> <p>To support the development of the strategy, the NT Government and Power and Water have commenced:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • data analysis of NT Government’s water use footprint in the Darwin region • a pilot audit program for NT Government greenspaces in Darwin region to identify opportunities for water efficiency improvement. The program includes identifying easy to fix irrigation leaks. • a partnership with Darwin Living Lab to explore locations for microclimate monitoring in Darwin greenspaces to better understand their cooling benefits and improve water efficiency. 	<p><i>On track</i></p>
<p>Early work commenced on developing a water charging framework. A stakeholder advisory committee was established and included peak bodies representing water license holders. Final consultation on a draft framework is expected in late 2024.</p>	<p><i>In progress</i></p>
<p>The Office of Water Security has commenced early stakeholder engagement to design a model for the Strategic Water Advisory Council.</p>	<p><i>In progress</i></p>
<p>The Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water Security invited feedback and input from peak Aboriginal organisations on the proposal to establish an Aboriginal Water Advisory Council, and consultations are in progress to inform the design of the Council.</p> <p>The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Treaty, and the Minister for Remote Housing and Homelands have also been consulted.</p>	<p><i>On track</i></p>

Priority action	Commitment	Delivery agencies	Priority areas
9. Understanding the cultural values of water	By 2024, the NT Government will partner with Aboriginal organisations to better understand the cultural values of water across the NT.	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security	
10. Improved Water planning	By 2025, the NT Government will deliver an improved water planning program	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security	
11. Contemporary water resource management legislation	By 2026, the NT Government will develop new legislation to replace the Water Act 1992 (NT) and provide a regulatory regime that supports sustainable development through contemporary water resource management.	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security	
12. Climate resilience an adaptation for a water secure future	By 2024, the NT Government will deliver a climate risk assessment to identify the risks to water security	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security	
13. Accelerated water science program	Starting in 2023, the NT Government will accelerate its existing water science program to support best practice water resource management and sustainable development.	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security	
14. Ensuring water supply and sewerage services meet customer needs	By 2023, the NT Government will deliver an economic regulatory reform roadmap for water supply and sewerage services with a focus on transparent and accountable decision making	Department of Treasury and Finance	

Rain over Barkley © Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security

Progress update	Status
<p>The Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security has commenced early stakeholder engagement to co-design the project with peak Aboriginal organisations.</p> <p>The department has commenced work on a Cultural Values Assessment for the Adelaide River Water Allocation Plan. The project was co-developed with the Northern Land Council. Learnings from this project will be used to inform the broader priority action and establish a framework and methodology for cultural values assessment and monitoring across both water allocation planning and water licensing.</p>	<i>In progress</i>
<p>The NT's water planning processes are largely consistent with the National Water Initiative, and are protective of values.</p> <p>Statutory water allocation plans have been delivered or are near completion in Mataranka, Western Davenport and Georgina Wiso areas over the last 12 months.</p> <p>The Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security is increasing Aboriginal representation in water advisory committees and supporting targeted engagement programs that focus on the people most directly affected by water allocation plans. This has focused first on improving Aboriginal involvement in water planning in both Adelaide River and Ti Tree.</p> <p>The department is creating a clearer process for the development, implementation and review of water allocation plans.</p>	<i>On track</i>
<p>A program for water reform has been published identifying 4 phases for developing a new Water Act by 2026. A Water Reform Taskforce has been set up and has started background research to inform a draft model for reform to share with representative peak bodies and interest groups. Broad public consultation on the model for reform will be undertaken through Have Your Say NT.</p>	<i>On track</i>
<p>The Office of Climate Change has led a whole of Territory climate risk assessment to identify risks to liveability. Water security is a part of the first pass assessment which will assist in identifying future areas of focus and prioritising adaptation actions.</p> <p>The NT Government will also be collaborating on the National Climate Risk Assessment being undertaken by the Australian Climate Service with a case study on water security for the NT. This will provide greater understanding of the climate risks to water and opportunities to adapt.</p>	<i>On track</i>
<p>The Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security has commenced an Accelerated Water Science Program to align its research focus with the NT Government's strategic policies and priorities. Additional investment of \$1.5 million by the NT Government and NWGA has been awarded to two new projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade of numerical models to improve knowledge of groundwater resources, develop water plans and better predict the impact of extractions. This includes update to the Western Davenport and Daly Roper models. Recalibration of Berry Springs, Koopinyah and Ti Tree groundwater models is to commence mid-2024. • LiDAR surveys are being conducted to improve digital elevation datasets in the Adelaide River, Daly River, Flora River, Roper River, Western Davenport, Berry Springs, Koolpinyah and Ti Tree areas. 	<i>On track</i>
<p>The NT Government has developed a set of high-level reform directions to improve economic regulation of water supply and sewerage services, including a roadmap for reform and how stakeholders can further engage in reform implementation. The reform directions were developed in consultation with stakeholders and are due to be released ahead of establishing a stakeholder reference group to guide the next stages of reform implementation.</p>	<i>On track</i>

Priority action	Commitment	Delivery agencies	Priority areas
15. Sustainable water supply for energy transition	Starting in 2024, the NT Government will accelerate activities associated with assessment of water availability for renewable hydrogen production to support the emerging hydrogen industry.	Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade	   
16. The role of the Office of Water Security	The NT Government will expand resourcing for the Office of Water Security to lead the implementation of the Territory Water Plan, including legislation and policy reform, community engagement on water stewardship initiatives, and cross government coordination and reporting.	Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security	   

The path ahead



In the coming years the NT Government will continue to deliver on priority actions in the Territory Water Plan. This includes working to secure safe and clean water for all Territorians through investment in water infrastructure, legislative and policy reform to support good decision making, and creating more opportunities for communities to learn about water and have their say on what matters to them.

Progress update

Status

Assessment of water availability to support renewable hydrogen production is underway as part of the NT Renewable Hydrogen Masterplan. The assessment and mapping of water availability across various water resource types will be done alongside detailed demand-side forecasting for prospective production activities and scenarios and is expected to be completed by the end of 2025.

On track

The Office of Water Security (OWS) established itself as its own office with responsibility to lead and coordinate water programs and priorities across the NT Government. The team is continuing to grow its capacity and capability to drive the implementation of the plan and is playing a lead role in delivering priority actions under the plan, coordinating across government and engaging with stakeholders and communities.

Delivered

OWS has developed a monitoring and evaluation framework that will be used to assess progress towards longer term outcomes of the Territory Water Plan at the end of 2025-2026.

In the first half of 2024, OWS facilitated the NT's engagement in the Commonwealth Government's national water reform as it updates the 2004 National Water Initiative. This included contributing to the Productivity Commission's National Water Reform 2024 Inquiry.

OWS will continue to play a key role in coordinating and supporting the NT's participation in national water reform.

The NT Government will continue to partner with the relevant experts to expand on its long standing research of the Territory's environmental and culturally significant water resources.

Water is life and is essential for supporting the aspirations of communities. From new industries and jobs for Territorians, to new housing and public amenities that make our communities liveable.

More frequent updates on the plan are available at watersecurity.nt.gov.au



Elsey Creek at Mataranka.