

**SUBMISSION BY THE COMMONWEALTH ENVIRONMENTAL WATER OFFICE ON
THE
DRAFT GWYDIR REGIONAL WATER STRATEGY**

About the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH) is a statutory position established under the *Water Act 2007* (Cth). The CEWH is responsible for managing the Commonwealth holdings of environmental water. These water holdings are managed to protect and restore the environmental assets of Murray-Darling Basin, including rivers, lakes, wetlands and floodplains, in the national interest. The CEWH manages the Commonwealth water holdings in accordance with the Basin Plan. The CEWH is supported by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO).

The Water Act gives effect to relevant international agreement on the environment, including the Ramsar Convention for wetlands of international significance, and conventions that protect endangered and migratory species. The CEWH's function is a part of the sustainable management of the Basin's water resources over the long-term for environmental, social, cultural and economic outcomes.

1. General comments

The CEWO appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft regional water strategies as part of the engagement being undertaken by NSW. The CEWO recognises the significance of these regional water strategies in planning for, and balancing, the demands on river systems across NSW for future decades. There is considerable complexity in some of the individual options as well as the potential for packages of options to result in both environmental benefits and impacts. Therefore, given the CEWO's interest and expertise across the Murray-Darling Basin, we would appreciate the opportunity to be involved in future discussions to help test and refine the regional water strategies and any projects or programs that may arise.

This submission focuses on the Gwydir regulated river where the CEWH holds entitlements (high security, general security, supplementary). However, the arrangements for unregulated water sources, groundwater systems and interception activities such as floodplain harvesting in the Gwydir catchment are also important to the entire water balance and system health. The CEWO recognises how severe the recent drought has been for communities across the Basin, including in the Gwydir catchment, and the challenges in achieving a balance under these circumstances.

Under normal operating conditions, the *NSW Water Management Act 2000*¹ prioritises water for the riverine environment and basic landholder rights (as noted in Table 2 of the draft Gwydir strategy). During a severe water shortage, critical human needs are prioritised, followed by the needs of the environment. In the prioritisation process to develop a package of options, the priorities under this Act would be an important consideration – e.g. options that provide for lower priority needs at the expense of higher priority needs would need consideration of appropriate offsets. How the various options are prioritised and packaged will affect the outcomes.

The sequence in which the options are implemented is also an important determinant of the outcomes through time. We suggest that options are implemented in a sequence that is consistent with the *Water Management Act 2000*, with those options contributing to securing critical human water needs and critical environmental needs being implemented first. Provision for critical environmental needs consider Matters of National Environmental Significance, including the needs of endangered species, like silver perch and Murray cod, as well as the Gwydir Wetlands. For transparency and to increase community confidence, independent bodies such as the Natural Resources Commission could be asked to publish advice on the packages and sequence of implementation that would be consistent with the *Water Management Act 2000*.

The CEWO also acknowledges the potential significant connections between the regional water strategies and the Basin Plan, particularly in regard to the protection of planned environmental water. An important example of a planned environmental rule in the Gwydir catchment is the 3 T rule. For transparency and clarity, the community may appreciate a clear explanation of the relationship between the regional water strategies and the Basin Plan, which both set a forward agenda for how water is to be managed at a broad scale.

1.1. Managing the impacts of a highly variable climate

The draft Gwydir regional water strategy provides challenging new information from NSW on likely climate and water availability changes in the region. This is a significant contribution and important when managing the Commonwealth holdings in a highly variable and changing climate.

Planning and adaptive management

The CEWO water management planning process considers how much water is expected to be available, the seasonal rainfall outlook and the needs of the environment. The planning process considers options for a range of weather scenarios (from dry to wet) so we can adapt to the seasonal conditions, changes in environmental demands and water availability. We work with the NSW environmental water manager and river operators to have water delivered, and to achieve environmental outcomes as efficiently and effectively as possible.

¹ NSW *Water Management Act 2000* - <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2000-092>

Carryover

Environmental demands and water availability vary between years. Commonwealth and NSW environmental water managers use carryover to help meet a range of environmental demands across multiple years. For example, environmental water has been carried over and managed over two to three years between wetter years to meet environmental demands in key assets such as the Gwydir River and Gwydir Wetlands. The ability to access carryover is critical to meeting environmental demands in a variable climate, particularly in dry years where environmental damage can occur. If there are risks associated with the availability of carryover within a particular year, these need to be clearly articulated months in advance to help water users make informed decisions when planning for the use of their allocated water.

1.2. Current and future challenges

Reduced water availability and ability to maintain environmental assets

The CEWO recognises that NSW is being forward looking by analysing future climate scenarios in a ground-breaking way. To increase community confidence in water planning, it is important that new climate data and updated modelling are shared with the community and with relevant agencies, including the MDBA. There should be an agreed consistent basis for the planning and management of water resources.

Higher temperatures, increased evaporation, changes to rainfall patterns and associated flows, and changes to the intensity and duration of dry and wet periods are all emerging risks. They have the potential to significantly impact water dependent ecosystems and the achievement of environmental water requirements (EWRs) as specified in the Gwydir Long-Term Watering Plan (LTWP), the Basin Environmental Watering Strategy, and the Basin Plan. Some of the options in the regional water strategy that increase the regulation of water may exacerbate these impacts and may need to be packaged with offsets that would have counterbalancing environmental benefits.

The potential for reduced water availability due to climate change is concerning for many users of water, including environmental water managers. Any such reductions would have implications for the ability to maintain some environmental assets, including the Gwydir Wetlands Ramsar site. Strategies for mitigating risks to the environment are required, with the baseline to at least maintain the current level of health and resilience or, ideally, to improve health and resilience.

Drought operations

During extreme dry conditions, river operators in northern valleys may use a range of practices such as ceasing deliveries beyond a certain point in the river, block releases and dam wall debiting. These practices reduce connectivity, impacting upon aquatic animals and river and wetland health. They can also have profound social and cultural implications. These practices should only be used occasionally and during extreme circumstances and not become more standard operational practice in the pursuit of system efficiencies, particularly

if they are implemented so that any savings are provided for lower priority uses under the *Water Management Act 2000*.

The process of re-starting rivers after dry times or cease-to-flow conditions needs to be carefully managed regardless of the water source. Protocols that guide the best way to re-start the river to minimize risks (e.g. water quality, fish death) and conditions (stratification, leaf litter) should be developed with advice from relevant agencies and experts (including DPIE-EES, DPI Fisheries, environmental water managers).

If the climate predictions eventuate, storage management (e.g. period and volume for essential supplies) and allocation processes may need to be reviewed and modified to reduce the risk of drought operation practices becoming implemented more often. Striking the balance between providing water allocations now and the risk of more frequent occurrence of stage 3 and stage 4 under the NSW Extreme Events policy in the future is important – all water users should be involved in this discussion.

Connectivity

Improving river connectivity within the Gwydir and to the Barwon-Darling is important and is consistent with the objectives of the Basin Plan. Water resource development and changing rainfall and inflow patterns have already impacted connectivity between the lower Gwydir and the Barwon rivers. However, under the climate predictions, reduced water availability and inflows may exacerbate reductions in connectivity. We would be concerned if “addressing inefficient delivery system management” resulted in a reduction of flows to the Gwydir Wetlands or the end of system. This may reduce planned environmental water and be inconsistent with the Basin Plan. Investigating strategies such as option 24 (connectivity with downstream systems) will be important to maintaining and improving connectivity with the Barwon River such as via the Mehi River or Carole Creek. It may be possible to package up options that provide an adequate level of river connectivity for resilience and health while achieving other benefits.

It is important that connectivity is a consideration across multiple regional water strategies in the northern basin. For the Barwon-Darling to also be healthy and resilient, the contribution of each tributary to the Barwon-Darling should have some proportionality to the natural distribution, and there should be enough flow in the Barwon-Darling with an appropriate temporal distribution.

Operation and maintenance of existing infrastructure

To maximise the effectiveness of all water sources to meet EWRs in the LTWP and the outcomes in the Basin Plan, existing infrastructure such as fishways, and regulators must be operated appropriately, regularly maintained and fixed in a timely manner. Operational protocols for infrastructure should be developed with input from relevant agencies such as DPIE-EES, DPI Fisheries, DPIE-Water, environmental water managers, and relevant experts. These protocols should be made publicly available to increase transparency. The effectiveness of the infrastructure and operation should be reviewed to ensure they are meeting their objectives and identify whether improvements can be made.

2. Comments on options

Consistency with the Basin Plan

Management of water resources in the NSW part of the Murray-Darling Basin must be consistent with the Basin Plan. We expect that any new option proposed under the regional water strategy would also be subject to the requirements of the Basin Plan. Options that involve changes to water resource plans are likely to require accreditation by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. New infrastructure or rules will need to ensure extraction is kept within Sustainable Diversion Limits (SDL)² and protect the effectiveness of planned environmental water. Improvements in reliability of supply may need to be offset to be compliant with the SDLs. Packaging of options will likely be required to achieve the outcomes envisioned by the regional water strategy without compromising the overarching Basin Plan objectives.

Environmental benefits and impacts

Some options may result in environmental benefits, and some could result in impacts. In general, options that lead to changes or reductions in river flows may compromise the achievement of EWRs in the LTWP, and outcomes in the Basin Environmental Watering Strategy. Potential impacts of the proposed options on Matters of National Environmental Significance such as threatened and migratory species and the ecological character of the Gwydir Wetlands Ramsar site would need to be assessed in accordance with the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* in addition to any requirements under relevant NSW environmental legislation such as the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*.

Options that result in increased reliance on groundwater may impact on groundwater levels, recharge rates and ongoing sustainability of groundwater resources. These impacts may be further exacerbated under climate change with predictions of less rainfall, runoff, and greater persistence of dry conditions. Increased use of groundwater may impact on groundwater dependent ecosystems, river flows and wetlands. This may increase environmental demands in river and wetland systems and the volume of water required to meet those demands. Further consideration of groundwater options should be informed by additional work on the sustainability of groundwater systems, such as options 14 to 16.

Feedback on specific options

The CEWH supports the following option as a high priority for further investigation:

- 9. Removal of system constraints in the Gwydir catchment to improve flows reaching the Gwydir Wetlands
- 10. NSW fish passage strategy

² MDBA submission on infrastructure.

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/submissions/69285/0125%20Murray%20Darling%20Basin%20Authority.pdf>

- 12. Cold water pollution mitigation measures
- 13. Diversion screens to prevent fish extraction at pump offtakes
- 17. Active management to share flows between consumptive and other uses
- 18. Modification and/or removal of floodwork structures causing adverse impacts

The CEWO is particularly interested in, and concerned about, the potential environmental impacts of the following options:

- 1. Enlargement of Tareelaroi Weir
- 2. New Lower Gravesend Dam on the Gwydir River downstream of Warialda Creek

While the CEWO does not reject these options outright, they will reduce the volume of water that reaches the most valuable environmental assets in the Gwydir River system and, depending on how they are operated, may not achieve the same or better environmental outcomes.

More detailed comments on specific options are provided in Attachment 1. While the comments in Attachment 1 are provided on individual options, when implemented together as a package the final suite of selected options may in combination provide a range of positive cultural, economic, social and environmental outcomes. The CEWO would appreciate being part of ongoing discussions regarding the options that are selected for implementation under the Gwydir regional water strategy.

3. Other remarks

3.1. Accountability and transparency

Improved accountability and transparency would be supported by making the following information and documents publicly available:

- Explanation of resource availability scenarios and allocation processes and associated risks for different licence types, particularly under future climate scenarios.
- Any WaterNSW environmental water management plan(s) or procedures for river operations in each valley (management of rise and falls of releases; water quality risks; river restart procedures etc).
- Operational protocols and procedures for infrastructure such as various fishways, the Tareelaro weir if enlarged; cold water pollution mitigation measures.
- Reasonable use guidelines for the take of stock and domestic water and basic landholder rights.

3.2. Vision and emphasis on the environment in the regional water strategy

The vision for the regional water strategies includes the need for the delivery of 'healthy, reliable and resilient water resources for a liveable and prosperous region'. Sustaining healthy rivers, wetlands and floodplains is necessary to have 'liveable and prosperous region'. For example, a healthy fish community in rivers is important for social and cultural outcomes, and ecosystem function is important for maintaining good water quality. The CEWO has an important role in contributing to this vision by protecting and restoring some environmental assets.

There is a box of definitions in the regional strategy. We suggest that it is important to add a definition of a 'healthy and resilient environment'. This would give more of a balanced emphasis on the environment in the regional water strategy, consistent with the *Water Management Act 2000*.

Attachment 1. Comments on the Long list of options and government commitments in the draft Gwydir Regional Water Strategy

Option	Comments
<p>1. Enlargement of Tareelaro Weir</p>	<p>The Mehi River is important for the connection of the native fish community in the Barwon River with that in the Gwydir system. Both Tareelaro Weir and associated regulators on the Mehi River are significant barriers to fish movement. Enlargement of the weir presents an opportunity to address fish passage issues in a key section of the Gwydir system. Additionally, there may be some occasions when the urgency of providing water to meet a critical environmental need downstream of Tareelaro means that it would be better to release water from Tareelaro than from Copeton Dam.</p> <p>However, depending on how it is operated, an enlarged Tareelaro weir could negatively impact on the environment. The weir may lead to a reduction to operational surpluses and changes to river flows in the Gwydir River. Reductions and changes in river flows may compromise the achievement of EWRs in the LTWP, the Gwydir River, and the ecological character of Gwydir Wetlands Ramsar site. Operation of the proposed weir could detrimentally impact connectivity and fish passage.</p> <p>The impacts of the weir would need to be assessed in an Environmental Impact Statement, and the pros and cons assessed. Any impacts on planned environmental water, reliability and potential growth in use should be assessed.</p>
<p>2. New Lower Gravesend Dam on the Gwydir River downstream of Warialda Creek</p>	<p>This option is likely to have a significant impact on the environment. The rationale for increased storage in a valley where there is already a very large headwater storage is not clear.</p> <p>Downstream of Copeton Dam, several tributaries (including Halls, Myall and Warialda Creeks as well as the Horton River) connect to the Gwydir River upstream of Gravesend. These tributaries provide unregulated flows that are important for the environment, including the internationally significant Ramsar listed Gwydir Wetlands.</p> <p>The NSW <i>Water Management Act 2000</i>¹ defines environmental water and requires a water sharing plan to commit water as planned environmental water. The current and proposed water sharing plans for the Gwydir regulated river identify planned environmental water rules for protecting inflows downstream of Copeton Dam for environmental purposes. As outlined in the</p>

	<p>proposed Gwydir Surface Water Resource Plan³ these rules include that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • during a supplementary water event, no more than 50% of uncontrolled flows downstream of Copeton Dam can be taken under supplementary water access licences; and • up to 500 ML/day of combined flow from the Horton River, Myall Creek and Halls Creek must be passed to the Gwydir wetlands in all but an extreme wet period. <p>It is possible that the operation of the new Lower Gravesend Dam could provide these flows from a volumetric perspective. However, environmental outcomes provided by unregulated/uncontrolled flows depend on the pattern of flows as well as the volume. It is likely that the regulation of uncontrolled flows would not be able to mimic the natural flow patterns necessary to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trigger key movement and spawning activities for several native fish species • provide inundation patterns necessary to maintain the ecological character of the Gwydir system’s various Ramsar listed wetland parcels. The Lower Gravesend Dam could significantly affect the health of the internationally significant Gwydir Wetlands. <p>In addition to not being able to maintain existing environmental outcomes, a Lower Gravesend Dam would almost certainly reduce fish passage and may increase cold water pollution or interfere with sediment and nutrient movement along the Gwydir River.</p>
<p>9. Removal of system constraints in the Gwydir catchment to improve flows reaching the Gwydir Wetlands</p>	<p>We are supportive of further development of this option and consider it a high priority. It is possible that this option may be implemented under the Northern Basin toolkit.</p> <p>Addressing these channel constraints would enable environmental water managers to increase flow rates to improve inundation of parts of the Gwydir Wetlands, including parts of the Ramsar site and may enable improved floodplain connection. This may improve the ability to meet some EWRs in the LTWP.</p> <p>Consideration should also be given on removal of system constraints to improve flows to the Mallowa and Ballin Boora wetlands.</p>

³ Proposed Gwydir Water Resource Plan - <https://www.mdba.gov.au/publications/mdba-reports/gwydir-water-resource-plan>

Option	Comments
10. NSW Fish Passage Strategy	<p>We are supportive of further development of this option and consider it a high priority.</p> <p>Providing effective fish passage for all life stages is critically important to improve native fish populations in the Basin. Addressing barriers to fish passage through the Gwydir catchment would improve the ability to achieve outcomes for native fish from environmental water deliveries and other flows.</p> <p>We note that there has been little progress on fishways in the northern Basin in the last four years despite there being some outstanding obligations for NSW to construct fishways as part of several dam safety upgrades. Some of these obligations to construct fishways (e.g. at Gunidgera Weir on the Namoi River) have existed for around a decade.</p> <p>Fishways need to be operated appropriately and maintained to ensure they are effective in providing fish passage. Across the northern Basin there are several examples of fishways not being used or where there have been significant delays in fixing them when infrastructure has failed.</p>
11. Ability to direct excess supplementary flows	<p>NSW is implementing this as part of changes to the Gwydir regulated water sharing plan. We support this, including that the NSW environmental water manager has a central role in decisions about the direction of excess supplementary flows.</p>
12. Cold water pollution mitigation measures	<p>Options to ameliorate cold water pollution released in the Gwydir valley are a high priority. This would improve riverine productivity, and support population recovery of native fish and other aquatic animals. It would improve the ability to achieve outcomes for native fish from all water deliveries including water for the environment.</p> <p>Mitigation measures and technologies need to be effective, reliable and reasonably easy to implement, adjust and maintain. Operational protocols need to be developed with input from relevant agencies (e.g. DPIE-EES and DPI Fisheries) and implemented.</p>
13. Diversion screens to prevent fish extraction at pump offtakes	<p>We are supportive of further development of this option and consider it a high priority.</p> <p>Diversion screens would reduce the loss of native fish from waterways and improve the ability to achieve environmental outcomes for native fish from environmental water deliveries and other flows.</p>

Option	Comments
16. Improved clarity in managing groundwater resources sustainably	<p>Whilst our focus is mainly on surface water, we are supportive of further development of this suite of groundwater options.</p> <p>Improved understanding of groundwater processes and sustainable access to groundwater is essential to implement existing water sharing plans and options in the strategy that increase reliance on groundwater resources. This is even more important under the climate change predictions.</p>
17. Active management to share flows between consumptive and other uses 24. Connectivity with downstream systems	<p>We are supportive of further development of this option as a high priority.</p> <p>Restoring longitudinal connectivity throughout the catchment is critical for supporting many of the ecosystem functions in the Gwydir and Barwon systems, including improving riverine productivity, water quality, native fish populations and other aquatic animals. Improved connectivity has significant cultural, social and recreational benefits.</p> <p>Protecting and restoring connectivity within and between water dependent ecosystems is an objective of the Basin Plan and an expected outcome of the Basin Wide Environmental Watering Strategy. Active management in the Gwydir unregulated system is an important step towards better connectivity with the Barwon.</p>
18. Modification and/or removal of floodwork structures causing adverse impacts	<p>We are supportive of further development of this option and consider it a high priority.</p> <p>Options to modify or remove identified priority floodplain structures and barriers that impede delivery of water to priority wetland and floodplain areas should be a priority. We are supportive of further development of this option.</p>
20. Investigation of water quality mitigation measures	<p>We are supportive of further development of this option.</p> <p>Real-time water quality monitoring key parameters such as dissolved oxygen and temperature would be beneficial during both normal and drought operations and river re-start protocols.</p> <p>Options for improving water quality in storages (e.g. mixing, bubblers, or other options) and released from storages should be considered in these options and may link with cold water pollution mitigation (Option 12).</p>

Option	Comments
<p>26. Addressing inefficient delivery system management</p>	<p>While the logic of this option is clear, water used to ‘run the river’ plays a role in achieving environmental outcomes across the Gwydir regulated river system. Key environmental outcomes that can be supported by delivery of consumptive water include supporting in channel flows that help native fish species to access in channel habitat.</p> <p>In assessing this option, it is important to recognise decreasing delivery losses is likely to have an impact on environmental outcomes. Determining the nature of trade-offs between increased efficiencies and environmental outcomes as well as identifying opportunities for maximising outcomes between the potentially competing priorities will be an important part of the formal assessment process for the Long list of options.</p>
<p>27. New drought operational rules (Gwydir River)</p>	<p>During extended dry sequences, adequate, transparent and timely management and sharing of water is critical in the Gwydir and other valleys. We would be concerned if drought operations became more standard practice, such as: ceasing deliveries beyond certain points of the river; dam wall debiting; block releases with rivers being stopped more often and the associated environmental risks of re-starting rivers (e.g. fish death events). Options such as storage management and allocation processes may need to be reviewed and modified to reduce the risk of drought operation practices becoming more common under the climate predictions.</p> <p>Any new drought operational rules and procedures need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clearly identify both critical human and environmental needs within the Gwydir, and identify how these needs will be addressed during extended dry sequences; • be clear and transparent; • assess the potential impacts to the environment; • address how tributary flows and first flush events will be managed; • ensure these practices are only used during extreme circumstances; • identify the impacts of the any new drought operation rules on the Basin Plan, SDLs, water sharing plans, planned environmental water and licence holders. <p>Importantly, environmental water managers were able to deliver water even in 2019. The recent extended dry sequence led to shutting off part of the Gwydir system, declining refuge pool water quality, fish rescues and fish deaths. The draft Gwydir regional water strategy includes many options to support critical human water needs but has limited regard to addressing critical environmental needs during extended dry times. The package of options implemented under the regional watering strategy should specifically identify measures to mitigate risks to the health and resilience of the environment during dry times. Given the likely impacts of climate change, appropriate planning and preparation is still very important.</p>

Option	Comments
28. Review of surface water accounting and allocation process	<p>We are supportive of further development of this option.</p> <p>With a changing climate, water allocation processes may need to be reviewed and adjusted. The review should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • historic inflow sequences, trends and climate change/variability while balancing the risk to allocation reliability. Further consideration should be given to whether the worst sequence of record is used, or whether there are points at which the allocation process is adjusted if the climate is becoming progressively drier; • the volume required to cover essential supplies and conveyance and how long these supplies should be kept in storage; • ensuring adequate water has been set aside for conveyance prior to announcing allocations against licenses; • ensuring carry over volumes are secure and if not, be clear about any associated risks for carryover; • priorities in the <i>Water Management Act 2000</i>; • how to meet critical environmental and human needs; <p>the implications of any changes for the WSPs, Basin Plan, SDL, PEW and all licence holders.</p>
29. Investigation of licence conversions	<p>Further consideration of this option would need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure there is adequate and appropriate consultation on the option and conversion factor; • ensure it was equitable and open to all general security licence holders whilst taking account that sometimes a lot of water can be required to provide flow at some locations; and • consider whether there are any impacts or implications of licence conversion for the Basin Plan, Sustainable Diversion Limit and planned environmental water. <p>Implementation of options need to be consistent with the Basin Plan. Options that reduce planned environmental water, change the Sustainable Diversion Limit, or increase reliability may need to be offset to continue to be compliant. Changes in the Water Resource Plans may require accreditation.</p>
30. Improved data collection and storage	<p>Improved groundwater and surface water data collection (water flows, levels and quality parameters) would be beneficial for river operation and environmental water management and implementation of surface and groundwater water sharing plans.</p>
32. Land use change impact on water resources	<p>We are supportive of further development of this option.</p> <p>Land use change can have a significant impact on water resources, demands, availability and in some cases can directly impact on water movement through the landscape. Strategic approach to land use planning and changes would be beneficial. Some stakeholders think that catchment changes may be as significant as climate change in affecting water availability.</p>

Option	Comments
<p>19. River Ranger Program</p> <p>21. Secure flows for water-dependent cultural sites</p> <p>33. Culturally appropriate water knowledge program</p> <p>34. Water-dependent practices and site identification project</p> <p>35. Shared benefit project (environment and cultural outcomes)</p> <p>36. Regional Cultural Water Officer employment program</p> <p>37. Regional Aboriginal Water Advisory Committee</p> <p>38. Water portfolio project for Aboriginal communities</p> <p>39. Co-management investigation of Travelling Stock Reserves</p> <p>40. Aboriginal cultural water access licence review</p>	<p>The CEWO is seeking increased opportunities to work with Aboriginal communities in the Gwydir valley.</p> <p>We are supportive of further development of this option.</p> <p>An Aboriginal River Ranger Program could provide numerous environmental and community benefits. For example, improving the health of rivers, lagoons and riparian areas, wetlands and floodplains and recovery of Country. An Aboriginal River Ranger Program is also likely to complement other river repair activities in the catchment and outcomes from the use of water for the environment. Ensuring the Program is sustainable with a source of funding will be important to continued implementation and success of the program.</p> <p>We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and their Nations have deep cultural, social, environmental, spiritual and economic connection to their lands and waters. Healthy rivers and full waterholes and weir pools also contribute significantly to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities along the rivers. The CEWH supports improving recognition of Aboriginal people's water rights, interests and access to water. The suite of proposed options would build capacity, support inclusion and real participation of Aboriginal people in water planning and management.</p> <p>Improved understanding of cultural values and traditional ecological knowledge would improve the ability of environmental water managers and river operators to support cultural values and sites with a range of water deliveries.</p> <p>Options that provide access to cultural licences would enable Aboriginal communities to directly manage water to support their values and sites.</p> <p>The Commonwealth holdings are to protect and restore environmental assets, particularly those subject to international agreements but can have regard for Aboriginal cultural values. The CEWO would be willing to work with a water advisory committee, should it be formed. This would enhance the ability of the CEWO to have regard for Aboriginal cultural values and achieve complementary cultural outcomes.</p>