

MEDIA RELEASE

National Water Week: Future is now for water in NSW

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The future is already here with water management in NSW redeveloped in recent years, said NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC) CEO Claire Miller at the start of National Water Week today.

This year's theme, *Reimagining our Water Future*, can be seen in practice in valleys across the State, where water take is being licensed and limited to sustainable levels, and the sector is working with agencies to improve river health and conservation of native species.

“We see the future today in the rice industry's work with scientists on farm practices to support the 40 per cent of endangered Australasian bitterns feeding and breeding in rice paddies in the southern Murray Darling Basin.

“And we see irrigators in the northern Basin working with agencies on appropriate triggers and regulation to protect first flush flows after prolonged dry periods, and to limit daily take at other times to keep rivers running from top to bottom.”

Shortcomings in NSW water management were highlighted in 2017, following the 4Corners program 'Pumped'. It led to an independent investigation into NSW water management and compliance, and a new urgent action plan for Government.

“Times have changed, the old days are gone,” Ms Miller said. “But despite initiatives such as the Natural Resource Access Regulator to enforce the rules and increased environmental watering using water bought from irrigators, many people are not aware of the changes.

“Many common community concerns have now been addressed or are well on track to being addressed very shortly. It is frustrating that old narratives still persist in water policy discussions today, when the regulatory framework and the sector have changed for the good and moved on.”

For National Water Week, NSWIC has rated the biggest changes to water management in recent times, and today can proudly present the top five results.

1) Water Police established in NSW

The establishment of the Natural Resource Access Regulator (NRAR) as water police, who use satellite technology and have boots on the ground to tackle water theft. Whilst most irrigators do the right thing, NRAR gives the public confidence that water laws are strictly enforced.

2) Australia is the world leader in water metering

Australia is now the world leader in metering water use by irrigators – in fact, the Australian metering standard (AS4747) is well recognised as being the highest standard globally. The standard is so high that, at first, no manufacturer in the world could meet it. New products had to be designed for the Australian market. The new water metering framework rolls out in NSW from December this year.

3) Sustainable levels of water use in place

The Sustainable Diversion Limits came into place in July 2019, and all water take must now be below these limits. Floodplain harvesting too, will be brought below these limits by 1 July 2021.

4) Environmental water growth

The Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder is now the largest entitlement holder in most Murray Darling Basin River Valleys. These entitlements were bought from irrigation farmers, with the environment now holding well over 20% of irrigation licences. This is in addition to the 60-70 per cent of river flows that are not diverted for any consumptive purposes.

5) Aussie irrigators are world leaders in water efficiency

Irrigation farmers in Australia are globally recognised as world leaders in water-efficient food and fibre production, producing more crop per drop than anywhere else in the world. According to the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment:

“Australian cotton growers are now recognised as the most water-use efficient in the world and three times more efficient than the global average”¹

“The Australian rice industry leads the world in water use efficiency. From paddock to plate, Australian grown rice uses 50% less water than the global average.”²

NSW is well on the way to meeting the theme of this year’s National Water Week.

“Despite these overall positive developments, much remains to be done,” Ms Miller said.

Whilst the irrigation industry is proud of how far water management has come, the reform path has not been easy. Many farmers and irrigation-dependent communities have been hit hard by the socioeconomic costs of reducing the water available to grow food and fibre.

“Looking forward, we need to find ways to improve water security, particularly for those farmers most affected by water reforms and drought.”

“A public conversation on water typically dominated by fear and conflict helps no one,” Ms Miller said. “We all have a responsibility to keep up to pace with the changes, acknowledge when things have changed, and not let outdated concerns hold back the conversations needed to move forward.

“Water management in NSW has been entirely revolutionised and reimagined, and for National Water Week this year, we hope people can be educated on just how far we’ve come, so we can all move forward.”

¹ <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/crops/cotton>

² <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/crops/rice>