

Managing water in the Territory

Water is managed by the Northern Territory Government for the benefit of all Territorians. Water resource management focuses on balancing productive use of water with long-term viability of the resource and the ecosystems that depend on it. It is underpinned by water science, monitoring and assessment.

Every state and Territory is responsible for its resource management, meaning that the way resources are managed vary across Australia. This statement clarifies the way we manage water in the NT.

NT Context

In the Northern Territory our water resources are largely intact with wild rivers and extensive groundwater resources. Our water resources support our Territory lifestyle, and we have water available to enable the economic development required to secure a productive future for all Territorians.

Water resource management in the Northern Territory is directed by the Water Act and guided by government policy. Water is vested with the Crown and managed by the Northern Territory Government for the benefit of all Territorians.

Water for economic benefit is held in water licences for a maximum renewable term of 30 years.

Who's involved

The Minister for Water Resources has overall responsibility for administering the Water Act, for establishing the standards for water resource management through water allocation planning and for investigating water resources and maintaining a monitoring program.

The Minister appoints the Controller of Water Resources (Controller) who is responsible for making licence and permit decisions and for compliance and enforcement activities.

The Water Resource Division of the Department of Lands, Planning and Environment supports the Minister and the Controller.

Northern Territory Civil and Administrative Tribunal is responsible for review of the Controllers decisions.

Water sharing priorities

Water resource management involves balancing competing demands and sharing water for the benefit of the Territory. We prioritise:

1. **Water for the environment:** We ensure the majority of water remains for, ecological functions, as well as the cultural and social functions of the resource. Under the [NT Water Allocation Planning Framework](#) all available scientific information for the resource is used to determine how water is shared; where there is no directly related research, allocation rules are applied.

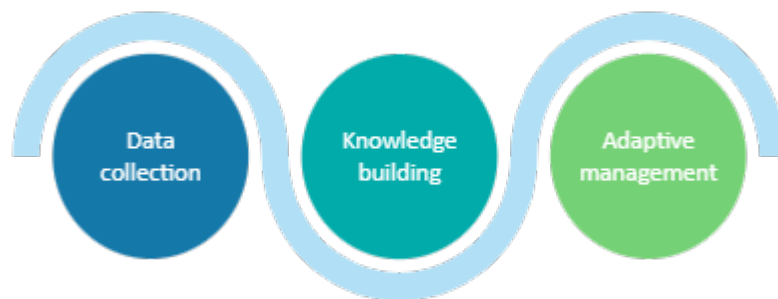
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2. **Water for drinking:** We then ensure the rights of landowners to access water for domestic purposes, and the provision of public water supplies to communities and regional centres are met. Water to support grazing stock is also provided for in law.
3. **Water for Aboriginal economic development:** Where there is eligible Aboriginal land, water is set aside through water allocation plans and licence decisions to support Aboriginal economic development. These Aboriginal water reserves are established in-line with the [Strategic Aboriginal Water Reserve - Policy Framework](#).
4. **Water for other economic development:** Water is available for economic development only where all of the above priorities can be met. Providing water to support economic development benefits the region and the Territory.

Water resource management is proportional

Water resource management is proportional to the nature and scale of opportunities for using the water and the impact this may have on the environment. More sophisticated, resource intensive controls are used to manage complex opportunities and risks. Where risks are very low, some controls are relaxed to allow greater focus on higher risk areas.

This proportional approach is a continuum of data collection, knowledge building and adaptive management.



Data collection involves continuously collecting data and information about our water resources through monitoring.

Knowledge building means taking data collected and analysing it to improve our understanding.

Adaptive management involves implementing evidence-based management actions; monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of these actions; and systematically adapting those actions according to what we have learned.

Water management tools

Water resource management relies on a combination of legislative and policy tools. The list below includes common tools used, ordered generally from less resource intensive to more resource intensive and sophisticated. Tools towards the top of the list apply across the Territory, tools later in the list are applied where there are more complex opportunities and risks.

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Centralised management - the Minister for Water Resources has responsibility for water resource management across the Territory. The Minister is abreast of the NT's economic agenda, and directs our management approach accordingly.

The Department of Lands, Planning and Environment brings together key lands, environmental, planning and water resource functions. The make-up of the department facilitates data sharing and collaboration about our natural resources.

Water licences - limit how much water a person can take from a water resource. Anyone taking water for economic purposes must have water licence. Water licences are decided by the Controller and may be traded in a water allocation plan area. A person that holds a licence has an obligation to use that water for the benefit of the Territory. To hold a water licence you will be required to demonstrate a purpose for the water and lawful access to the land from where you propose to take the water. To get information about all current water allocation licences in the Northern Territory at:
<https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/licensing/licensing-portal>

Exemptions - can be declared to remove requirements for approvals and permits under the Water Act, enabling management efforts to focus on areas and activities of higher risk. Exemptions are not fixed; they can be changed to respond to emerging risks. A list of exemptions is available online:
<https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/licensing/exemptions>

Water monitoring - the NT Government has proud history of nearly 70 years of hydrogeological science. While more intense efforts occur in areas of higher demand, data is gathered across the NT. Government implements ongoing groundwater and surface water monitoring programs gathering routine data from a network of more than 150 surface water and 550 groundwater sites. To can get information about the latest water levels in the Northern Territory at: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/water-in-the-nt/water-data-portal>.

Water control districts - are declared when there are signs of increasing demand or stress on a water resource. Districts help enhance the understanding of the water resource and its use by increasing reporting obligations for water users and water bore drilling. A map of the Territory's declared districts are available at: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-control-districts>

Science and investigation - As demand increases in an area, efforts to assess and build on monitoring data increase. Government undertakes collaborative research programs to grow its water resource knowledge. The NT is also working on approaches to further document and understand ecological and cultural requirements of water.

Government policy and guidelines - Government sets the decision-making framework for individual approvals through law and policy to provide a consistency and coordination. Water resource management policies and guidelines are available online: <https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-policies-and-guidelines>.

Announced allocations - is an adaptive management action that allows water licences to be temporarily reduced. Announced allocations ensure priority water requirements continue to be met within our variable climate. Water allocation plans guide announced allocations in a plan area, otherwise the NT Water Allocation Planning Framework is used as a guide.

Recovery of unused licensed water - is an adaptive management action that allows water that is not required by a water licence holder to be made available to other users. Recovering unused water

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stimulates the productive use of water and can be used to support and progress the objectives of water allocation plans.

Water resource models - are computer simulations of natural water systems. Models allow us to predict the impacts of water resource use and management actions, they are a fundamental tool for adaptive management. Models rely on real world information, including measurements from drill cores, monitoring, field tests, remote sensing, and geophysics. Simulations are verified with measured groundwater levels and surface water flows; models are regularly recalibrated and updated.

Water allocation plans - specify the volume of water that can be taken from a water resource and allocates that water amongst uses. It sets objectives for water sharing, and a process for reviewing and adjusting the plan. It is supported by implementation actions including monitoring to support the management decisions to meet the plan's objectives. More sophisticated plans involve water management zones, advisory committees, water management rules (e.g. trade and. announced allocations).

Water management zones - can be used within a plan area to recognise variations in the characteristics of a water resource and to provide an additional level of protection with specific water management rules.

Water advisory committees - advise on water resource management, typically associated with water allocation plan areas. Committees help inform what social, cultural, economic, and environmental values should be prioritised as part of a plan. Committees form part of the review and adjustment of a plan, by advising on the effectiveness of a plan in maximising the economic and social benefits within ecological constraints.

Trade - of water entitlements can be a useful tool to increase the productive use of water, without increasing the total amount of water that can be taken across the resource as a whole. Territory's water systems function largely in their natural state meaning surface flows cannot be controlled to facilitate complex water trading markets. Trade can occur within water allocation plan areas, subject to approval by the NT's Controller of Water Resources. Trade decisions are guided by the water allocation plan and the [Trading Licensed Water Entitlements Policy](#).

Find out more

You can find out more about water resource management in the NT online here:

<https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-policies-and-guidelines>