

Consultation Summary

Alice Springs Water Allocation Plan 2026 - 2036

Document title	Consultation Summary
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Approved by	Executive Director Water Resources
Date approved	21 July 2026
TRM number	42-D26-19073

Version	Date	Author	Changes made
0.1	1 May 2026	External consultant	First draft
0.2	5 June 2026	External consultant	Second draft
1.0	21 July 2026	Water Resources	Final

Acronyms	Full form
AAPA	Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority
Water Act	Water Act 1992 (NT)
ALEC	Arid Lands Environment Centre
ASTC	Alice Springs Town Council
AWR	Aboriginal Water Reserve
CLC	Central Land Council
Controller	The Controller of Water Resources appointed under the <i>Water Act 1992</i>
Department	Department of Lands, Planning and Environment
DKA	Desert Knowledge Australia
DLPE	Department of Lands, Planning and Environment
ESY	Estimated sustainable yield
GDE	Groundwater dependent ecosystem
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
NT	Northern Territory
NTIBN	Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network
PWC	Power and Water Corporation
RDA	Regional Development Australia
WAC	Water Advisory Committee

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Lands, Planning and Environment respectfully acknowledges the Northern Territory's Aboriginal people and their rich culture and pays respect to the Elders past and present.

We acknowledge the Arrernte people as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the lands and waters of the Alice Springs water control district.

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.

Disclaimer

The Department of Lands, Planning and Environment (the department) engaged GHD Pty Ltd to prepare this Consultation Summary of the engagement activities undertaken for the draft Alice Springs water allocation plan (draft plan).

This report and its associated schedules have been prepared by GHD for the department and may only be used and relied on by the department for the purpose of summarising records of community consultation for the Alice Springs water allocation plan.

GHD otherwise disclaims responsibility to any person other than the department arising in connection with this report.

The services undertaken by GHD in connection with preparing this report were limited to the analysis and summarisation of consultation records provided to GHD by the department. For the preparation of the Response and Resolution sections, GHD relied on content provided by the department.

The opinions, conclusions and any recommendations in this report are based on conditions encountered and information reviewed at the date of preparation of the report. GHD has no responsibility or obligation to update this report to account for events or changes occurring after the date that the report was prepared.

GHD has prepared this report based on information provided by the department who provided information to GHD, which GHD has not independently verified or checked beyond the agreed scope of work. GHD does not accept liability in connection with such unverified information, including errors and omissions in the report which were caused by errors or omissions in that information.

1. Consultation snapshot

The Alice Springs water allocation plan 2026 – 2036 (the plan) sets rules for sharing and managing groundwater to maintain public water supply, ensure sustainable development, protect environmental values, and recognise Aboriginal cultural and community interests. A draft version of the plan was developed between 2025–2026, with release of the draft plan, draft background report, and implementation actions in February 2026 for public consultation.

This summary outlines the engagement undertaken, the feedback received, and how feedback has been considered in the final Alice Springs water allocation plan 2026-2036.

1.1. How we engaged

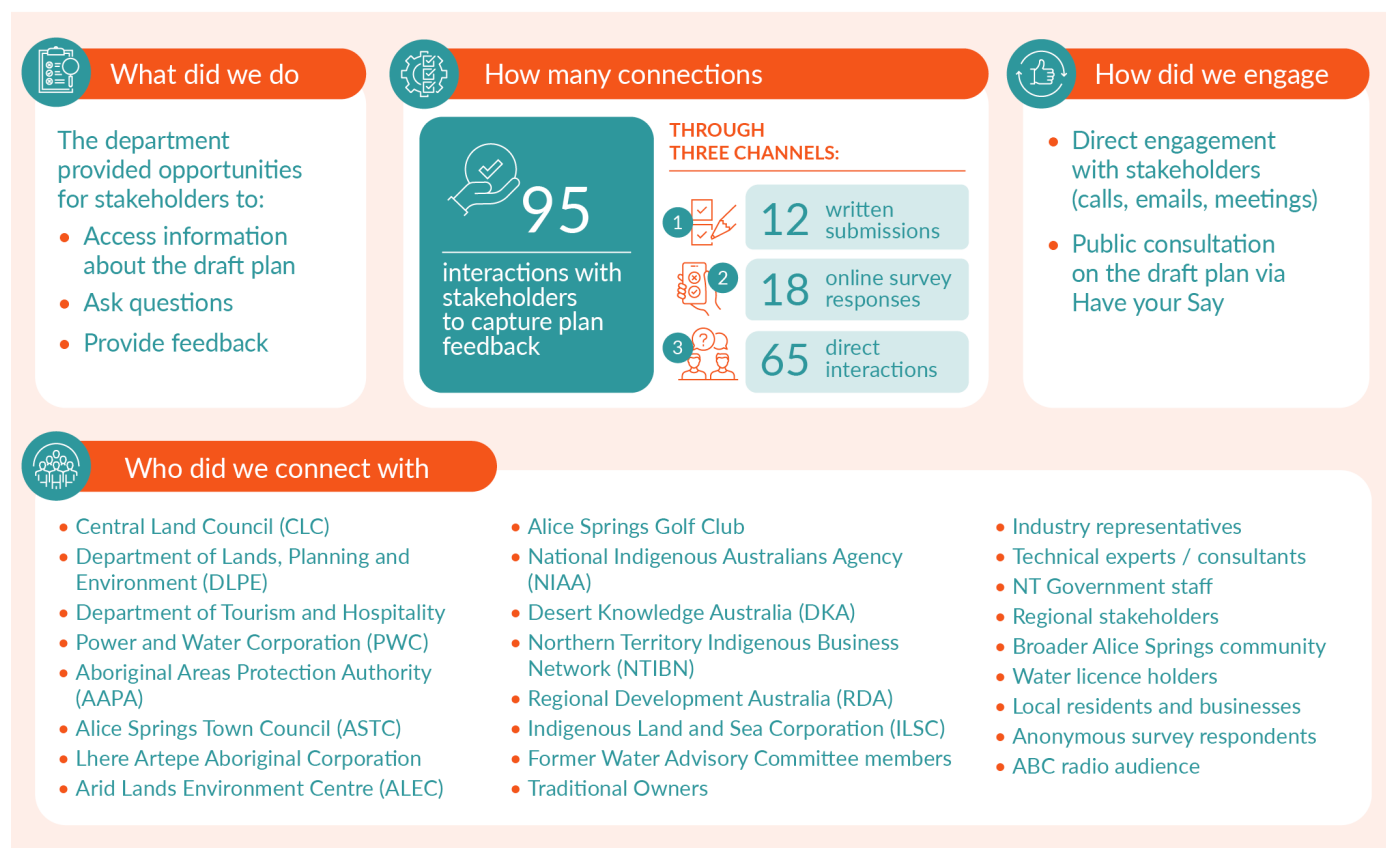
The Department of Lands, Planning and Environment (the department) engaged on the draft Alice Springs water allocation plan 2026–2036 through a combination of direct engagement with key stakeholders and engagement via the NT Government Have Your Say platform during the public comment period from 16 February to 17 March 2026.

Engagement activities were guided by a structured stakeholder engagement approach designed to identify stakeholders with an interest in, or the potential to be affected by, future water management decisions in Alice Springs plan area. Consultation activities were undertaken using a fit-for-purpose engagement approach developed by the department. Key stakeholders were identified by Water Resources through a stakeholder analysis which informed a communication plan. These groups included Aboriginal organisations, residents, industry and water users, environmental organisations, and government agencies. The engagement mechanisms used provided opportunities for participants to access information about the draft plan, ask questions, and provide feedback through meetings, briefings, written submissions, and survey responses. The engagement program enabled participation from a broad range of stakeholders across the plan area.

Feedback was received from a diverse range of stakeholders. Organisational submissions were provided by PWC, CLC (with an independent technical review from HydroGeoEnviro), ALEC, DKA, AAPA and technical consultants. Submissions were also received from community members, licence holders, and anonymous survey respondents. The majority of respondents were Alice Springs or NT based.

It is important to note that a Water Advisory Committee (Committee) was not established for the development of the plan as there was not sufficient response to the Expression of Interest process undertaken in 2024. Instead, consultation was undertaken directly with peak bodies, key stakeholder groups and the broader community. This approach made sure that feedback was obtained from a range of water users to represent the beneficial uses of water such as public water supply, agriculture and industry as well as cultural and environmental values.

The department acknowledges that some groups indicated a need for earlier, deeper, and more sustained engagement on the plan. The department acknowledges this feedback and has committed to ongoing engagement with these groups to support implementation of the plan and to inform future reviews.



1.2. What we heard

Overall, community perceptions of the draft plan were unsupportive, with most feedback expressing concern about whether the plan provides sufficient protection and whether the planning process provided enough transparency and local involvement. The issues raised most consistently and strongly related to the plan's core settings for how much water can be taken, the estimated sustainable yield (ESY), where and how extraction is managed (management zones), and how decisions are made (governance and consultation). Aboriginal organisations, environmental groups, and stakeholders with a strong interest in groundwater science and long-term water security expressed a desire for more prolonged involvement in the Plan development.

The strongest feedback focused on the proposed ESY and related allocation changes, with many submitters questioning the scientific basis for the increase (particularly in the Town Basin) and expressing concern about long-term impacts on groundwater dependent ecosystems (GDEs), water quality, and drinking water security.

A second major focus was the revision of management zones, with strong opposition to removing the Inner Farm and Wannardi management zones from the previous water allocation plan, and concern that their removal would reduce place-based safeguards.

The third most prominent issue was governance and consultation, which included repeated calls for a Committee and for Traditional Owners and the broader community to be involved earlier and more continuously in the plan development.

By comparison, feedback on implementation and monitoring was also common but tended to reinforce these core concerns (for example, requests for stronger triggers, earlier actions, and clearer accountability).

A small set of comments were supportive of the use of Committee in water planning as governance mechanisms enabling transparency and supportive of water planning in general.

1.3. How we responded

The final plan incorporates changes directly informed by consultation, including:

- improving the clarity of the supporting technical information (including clearer explanations of key concepts, assumptions, and the rationale for key settings) and strengthening supporting communication materials to help non-specialists understand how decisions were informed
- inclusion of Wanngardí and Inner Farm management zones in response to community feedback on the importance of these areas continuing to be represented in the water plan to support social and environmental values the plan
- additional guidance for water extraction within the same resource as public water supply to ensure water availability and water quality is protected
- committing to further work with Traditional Owners to identify, monitor and protect water-dependent cultural values
- reinforcing the risk-based monitoring and adaptive management approach and using the five-year review to consider new data and research findings and whether plan settings remain appropriate
- an updated FAQ document to support community understanding and engagement with the declared plan

The Department of Lands, Planning and Environment (the department) thanks those who provided feedback, which has contributed to improvements to the next iteration of the water allocation plan for the Alice Springs area. The department acknowledges this feedback and has committed to ongoing engagement to support implementation of the plan and to inform future reviews.

2. Introduction

The Alice Springs water allocation plan 2026-2036 provides a framework to manage and allocate water resources in the Alice Springs region, whilst recognising the environmental, cultural, social, and economic values of water.

Water allocation plans are long-term regional plans that guide how water is shared fairly and sustainably across the Territory. The plans set clear limits on how much water can be used, who can use it and how much needs to be left to protect the environment. Water plans are in place for up to 10 years and are reviewed at least every 5 years to make sure they remain fit for purpose as conditions, knowledge, and community needs change.

A draft version of the plan was developed between 2025–2026, with release of the draft plan, draft background report, and implementation actions for public consultation in February 2026.

This summary outlines the engagement undertaken, the feedback received, and how it shaped the final water allocation plan.

The department recorded 95 interactions with stakeholders to capture feedback on the plan through three channels: 12 written submissions, 18 online survey responses, and 65 direct interactions.

Information regarding water allocation plans is available at:

<https://nt.gov.au/environment/water/management-security/water-plan>

3. How we engaged on the Plan

Effective engagement is the keystone of contemporary water resource management.

The department is committed to involving relevant stakeholders in the water planning process. This document describes the mechanisms in which the department has captured and considered public concerns and aspirations and outlines how this has influenced the plan.

Public participation in water planning as outlined in [Engaging Territorians](#) management statement available online [Water policies and guidelines | NT.GOV.AU](#)

The 3 mechanisms for public participation are:

- Water advisory committees: as a collective, there is diverse representation of the community values
- Departments direct engagement with peak bodies and interest groups: groups represent their own views and values
- Public comment period: the wider community have an opportunity to comment and share their views

The department has adopted the International Association for Public Participation model (IAP2 Spectrum) for its engagement activities. An overview of the definition of public participation is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the definition of the public participation for engagement activities*

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Goal of engagement*	Community members are well informed	Community members are well informed and give feedback that government considers	Community members are well informed and actively contribute to government decisions		
			Some say	High level or equal say	Total say

*Adapted from [Remote engagement and coordination strategy](#) and the [International association for public participation](#).

3.1. Establishment of a Water Advisory Committee

Expressions of interest opened on 30 July 2024 and closed on 27 August 2024 for the establishment of the Alice Springs Water Advisory Committee (along with Daly River and Ti Tree).

No more than 4 expressions of interest were received (3 through official application forms and 1 through an informal avenue).

Of the interest received, there was not enough diversification to form a committee that could represent the range of community values in the plan area.

A Water Advisory Committee should reflect the local community including various beneficial uses of water such as public water supply, agriculture and industry as well as cultural and environmental values.

In lieu of a water advisory committee, the Department engaged directly with peak bodies/interest groups as well as providing for a public comment period.

3.2. Direct engagement with peak bodies and key stakeholders

The department engaged key stakeholders to test the Draft Alice Springs water allocation plan and gather targeted feedback on its practical and policy implications. Engagement focused on organisations with statutory roles, industry interests, environmental expertise, and local knowledge relevant to the Plan area.

Stakeholders were provided with clear, information and opportunities to ask questions and raise issues specific to their sectors. Their input helped identify areas where additional explanation, improved communication materials or policy clarification were needed. The engaged stakeholder groups can be found in Section 1.1.

A summary of each engagement activity, including format and key topics discussed, is provided in Schedule 1.

3.3. Public comment

The draft Alice Springs water allocation plan 2026–2036, draft background report and draft implementation actions report were released for public comment through the Northern Territory Government's Have Your Say platform, supported by direct submissions via email. Public comment was captured over a six-week period from 16 February to 17 March 2026, with extensions up to two-weeks granted on a case-by-case basis, where requested.

A total of 30 submissions were received throughout the public comment period. This included:

- 18 submissions via survey only
- 9 written submissions
- 3 submissions that included a written and survey submission.

Written submissions were received from a mix of organisations and individuals, including government agencies, Aboriginal organisations, NGOs, industry representatives, technical experts, and community members.

Of the 21 survey responses, 90% of respondents (19 of 21) identified as local residents or businesses within the plan area, with one response submitted on behalf of an organisation and one identifying as a non-government organisation. Consistent with this, the majority of survey-only responses and written-only submissions were from local entities with 89% (16 of 18) and 78% (7 of 9) respectively. It is also important to note that three respondents (14% of survey respondents) provided both a written submission and a survey response.

Survey data indicates a high level of engagement with the draft materials, with 90% of respondents confirming they had read the plan (19), 81% for the background report (17), and 71% for the implementation actions (15).

Responses highlighted low confidence in key aspects of the plan, including;

- the clarity of the scientific information with 67% (14) of respondents indicated it was not clear
- whether the plan provides for the best use of the water resource, 81% (17) indicated it does not
- whether implementation actions adequately address identified risks, 71% (15) indicated they do not.

Notably, 18 respondents indicated they were not confident the plan will protect water resources, and only one respondent considered the proposed Estimated Sustainable Yield (ESY) to be appropriately balanced.

Power and Water Corporation (PWC) and the Central Land Council (CLC) provided detailed submissions containing technical information relevant to their respective interests in the management of water resources in the Alice Springs region.

Further detail on public comments and how they were considered in finalising the plan is Section 4 below with collated responses provided Schedule 2.

4. What we heard and how we responded

There was strong consensus on several key elements in the feedback across respondents:

- a consistent call that a Committee should have been established before drafting the plan and must be in place before finalisation.
- strong opposition across multiple stakeholder groups to removing the Inner Farm and Wannardi management zones from the plan.
- multiple submissions noted that Traditional Owners should have been consulted before the plan was drafted, not just during the public comment period.
- widespread concern that recommendations from the 2021 Technical Review have not been delivered and that implementation actions in the draft plan are weak, vague, or delayed.
- a call for key technical documents, including the Knapton (2022) modelling report¹, to be made publicly available and that monitoring coverage needs to be expanded.

Feedback was analysed to extract 183 comments which were organised into eight themes. The most frequently raised theme was governance and consultation, accounting for 19% (34) of all comments, followed by management zones and environmental and cultural water values (each 14%, 25 comments). Sustainable yield and water resource information each attracted 13% of comments (24 comments each).

The overall sentiment of feedback was predominantly critical or of concern in nature. Of the 183 themed comments, 86% (157) were classified as concerned, 13% (24) as neutral or mixed, and only 1% (2) as supportive.

Concern was most pronounced in relation to sustainable yield and water resource information, with stakeholders questioning the scientific basis for the proposed changes. Feedback on water allocation and licensing was more balanced, comprising a mix of concerns and neutral procedural comments. A small number of positive comments acknowledged the value of establishing a Committee (although this was not utilised in the development of this plan), as well as the broader water allocation planning framework.

The following sections provide detailed discussion of feedback received under each theme, together with the department's response to feedback.

¹ Knapton, A, CloudGMS Pty Ltd and Northern Territory. Department Environment and Natural Resources. (2022) Development of a Groundwater Model of the Mereenie Aquifer system. CloudGMS Pty Ltd, Goodwood (SA). Retrieved 2026, June 1, from <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/1027730>.

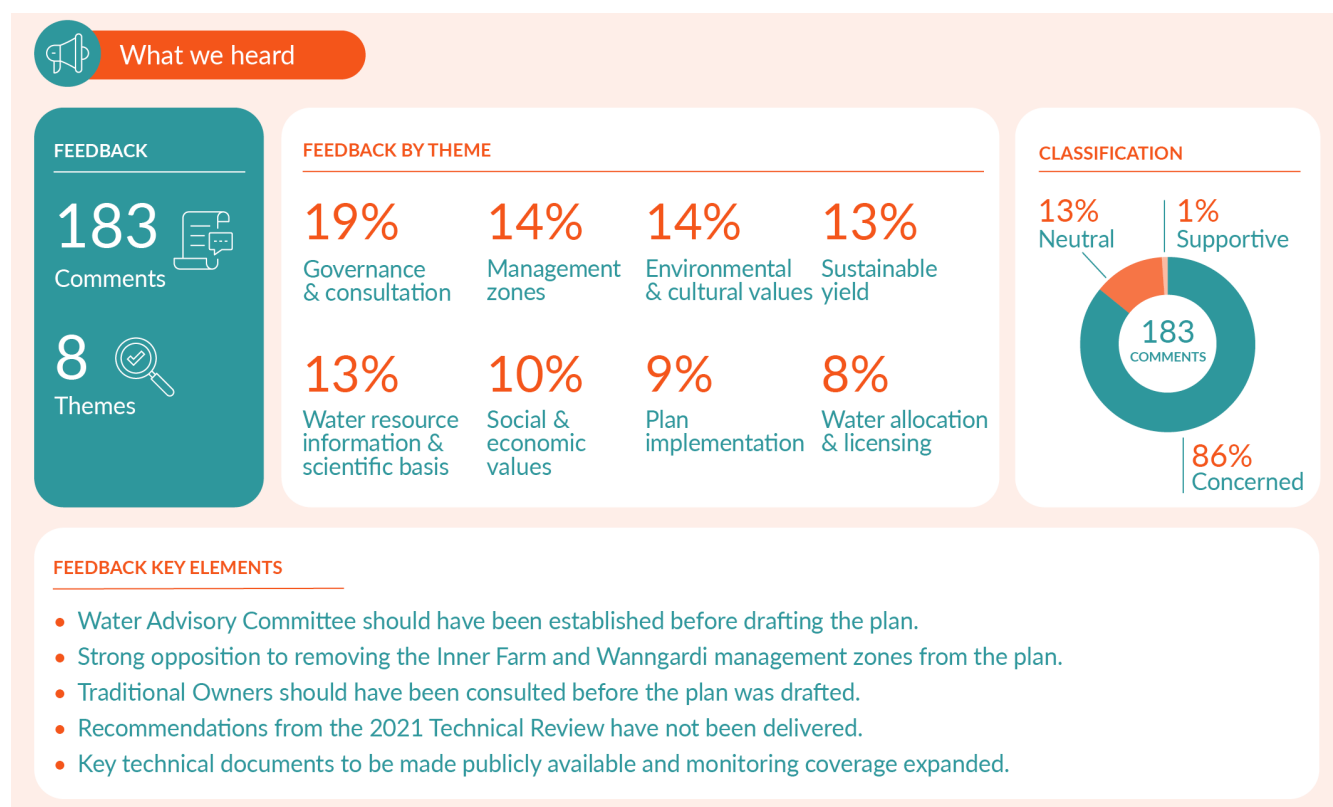


Figure 1. What we heard

4.1. Water resource information and scientific basis

The draft plan draws on technical reports, scientific information, and modelling to describe the groundwater systems underlying Alice Springs and inform extraction limits.

Many submissions commented that the scientific basis of the draft plan, as presented, is insufficient to support the proposed changes from the previous plan. Submissions frequently noted that there is inadequate articulation of hydrogeological heterogeneity, vertical connectivity between aquifers, and recharge/discharge dynamics. Several submissions suggested that monitoring coverage is insufficient and that dual or nested monitoring bores are required in multiple locations.

Other submissions raised concerns that the Background Report relies on outdated sources without citing more recent works, and that key modelling should be made publicly available for scrutiny. Some respondents noted that figures are partly unreadable and that the technical content is not easily understood by non-scientists. The department will make sure that previously unclear figures are improved for clarity and are easier to interpret.

Water resource information and scientific bases	No. of mentions	How we heard feedback	Who mentioned it	Feedback sentiment
	24	5 written submissions 16 surveys 3 direct engagements	PWC, CLC, ALEC, DKA, community members, anonymous survey respondents	23 concerned 1 mixed 0 supportive

4.1.1. Responding

The department acknowledges the importance of robust, transparent science in water planning. The plan is underpinned by 70 years of continuous groundwater monitoring and investigation by the Water Resources Division, with the bore database established in 1959².

The 2025 Alice Springs Water Resource Assessment synthesised the latest available data, including updated groundwater modelling and long-term hydrograph analysis³. The department's hydrogeologists worked in collaboration with Geoscience Australia under the Exploring for the Future program, which undertook extensive hydrogeological investigations in the Alice Springs focus area between 2017 and 2019⁴.

The department acknowledges that some technical content may be difficult for non-specialists to interpret and that some graphics were difficult to read. The department has improved clarity of graphics for more effective communication.

These matters are addressed through the plan documents, including the background report (which summarises the available science and technical investigations that informed the plan), the implementation actions (which set out a program of monitoring and investigations over the plan term), and supporting communication materials (including FAQs).

No substantial changes to the draft plan documents occurred in response to this theme.

4.2. Management zones

The draft plan consolidated 12 management zones from the previous plan into three zones (Town Basin, Outer Farm Basin, and Mereenie Aquifer System) and removed the Inner Farm and Wanngardí Basins as well as surface water catchments from the Plan.

Many submissions strongly opposed the removal of the Inner Farm and Wanngardí management zones. Submissions frequently noted that the rationale for removing these zones has not been clearly communicated or justified, and that removal of these zones leaves shallow aquifers vulnerable to increased extraction without adequate protection.

Other submissions indicated that the Wanngardí Basin is significant to rural residents, including caravan parks, and is understood to be at capacity for extraction. Several submissions recommended that consolidating previous groundwater management zones into a single 'Mereenie Aquifer System' comes with risk. Management zones should align with hydrogeological flow paths and natural compartments, and that sub-management rules for each aquifer system should be reintroduced.

	No. of mentions	How we heard feedback	Who mentioned it	Feedback sentiment
Management zones	25	 15 written submissions  5 surveys  5 direct engagements	PWC, CLC, ALEC, community members, licence holders, anonymous survey respondents	 22 concerned  3 mixed  0 supportive

² NT Water Resources Division 70 Years (environment.nt.gov.au/water/celebrating-70-years-water-resources)

³ Alice Springs water assessment report (Water Resources Division, Technical Report 06/2025)
<https://territorystories.nt.gov.au/10070/1002598/0>

⁴ Geoscience Australia, Exploring for the Future—Alice Springs hydrogeology synthesis report (2021) (ecat.ga.gov.au)

4.2.1. Responding

The department acknowledges the strong feedback received regarding the proposal to consolidate management zones and remove Inner Farm and Wanngardí Basins from the water allocation plan.

The draft plan proposed consolidating management zones to simplify administration and to align zones with the primary hydrogeological units. Inner Farm and Wanngardí were proposed for management under policy rather than the plan due to their small volumes and limited licensed extraction⁵.

Following significant public feedback and concerns raised, Inner Farm and Wanngardí have now been included as management zones in the plan and are subject to:

- conservative allocation limits
- ongoing monitoring and adaptive management through the plan’s review mechanisms
- inclusion in the plan implementation actions.

The Mereenie Aquifer System management zone will remain as a single consolidated zone, however, management rules have been included to ensure water availability and water quality are considered in water licence decisions to ensure protection of public water supply.

The department recognises that stakeholders valued the transparency and regulatory certainty provided by zone-specific controls for the Mereenie and associated aquifer units in the previous plan. The plan documents include explanatory information in the background report and implementation actions intended to support understanding of the revised approach to consolidate management zones and update management rules and how they would operate over the plan term.

Implementation and any future changes to management settings (including zone boundaries) would be considered through statutory review processes, including the five-year review of the plan.

4.3. Sustainable yield

The estimated sustainable yield (ESY) is a key measure in the Plan which caps water allocated to beneficial uses. The draft plan proposed an overall ESY of 24,670 ML per year, with the Town Basin ESY increasing from 1,000 ML/year under the 2016-2026 water plan to approximately 3,100 ML/year.

37% (11) of submissions commented that the proposed ESY increase is not supported by available hydrogeological evidence. Submissions frequently noted that applying a single ESY across different aquifer systems conceals major hydrological and economic differences.

Other submissions indicated that the ESY should recognise that total aquifer storage does not always reflect accessible water as this can be constrained by the cost of deep extraction which has the potential to limit public water supply. Several submissions recommended that separate ESYs should be set for the Town Basin, Outer Farm Basin, and Mereenie Aquifer System sub-areas.

"The term 'sustainable' is misleading when groundwater reserves are finite and extraction exceeds recharge." – Survey respondent

	No. of mentions	How we heard feedback	Who mentioned it	Feedback sentiment
Sustainable yield	24	10 written submissions 13 surveys 1 direct engagements	PWC, CLC, ALEC, community members, anonymous survey respondents	23 concerned 1 mixed 0 supportive

⁵ Draft Alice Springs water allocation plan 2026-2036 and/or Draft Alice Springs background report 2026-2036

4.3.1. Responding

The department acknowledges the significant feedback received regarding the estimated sustainable yield (ESY) presented in the draft plan, including concerns about proposed increases compared with the previous plan and the application of a single ESY across different aquifer systems.

The plan was informed by hydrogeological investigations, including the 2025 Alice Springs Water Resource Assessment and updated groundwater modelling as relevant in the Mereenie Aquifer System. This has allowed for the reassessment of long-term extraction limits relative to historic plans. This work improved understanding of aquifer connectivity, long-term drawdown behaviour, and storage distribution across the plan area³.

No groundwater model is available for the shallow alluvial systems within the plan area.

The department recognises that, while improved understanding reduces knowledge gaps, it does not eliminate underlying uncertainty, particularly in relation to shallow alluvial systems and groundwater-dependent ecosystems.

Following public feedback and concern regarding potential impacts to public water supply and environmental and cultural values across the plan area, the ESY for each management zone has been reviewed and revised.

In the revised plan, the ESY for each groundwater management zone maintains volumes at or near current allocations, with the inclusion of revised rural stock and domestic estimates, an allocation to the environment (as required by the Water Act) and a portion for Aboriginal economic development.

Within the Mereenie Aquifer System, the ESY in the revised plan remains a single volume for the consolidated geological units. However, for any new developments requiring water, assessment in the water licensing process will consider section 4.4 of the plan and factors under section 90 of the Water Act including water availability and water quality and the objectives of the water allocation plan. This includes providing long term security of a sufficient quantity and quality of water for public water supplies.

The term “estimated sustainable yield” is a requirement under section 22B(5) of the Water Act. The Water Resources Division has published a Management Statement to provide more information on Estimated Sustainable Yield considerations⁶. An ESY is set for each groundwater management zone and is not transferrable across management zones.

The plan provides for review at intervals of no longer than five years, and the review may be informed by outcomes of ongoing monitoring, licensing controls and applied adaptive management along with new data and research findings.

4.4. Water allocation and licensing

The draft plan set out how water is allocated between uses (public water supply, environment, Aboriginal Water Reserve, licensed and unlicensed users) and the rules governing water access and trades.

Many submissions commented that allocations to existing public water supply licences must remain protected under the new plan.

⁶ Water Resources Division. Water Resource Management Statement – Estimated Sustainable Yield. Department of Lands, Planning and Environment, Northern Territory Government.

Submissions frequently noted that hydrogeological impact assessments should be required before approving trades or relocations to prevent unintended impacts on water quality, supply reliability, and groundwater-dependent ecosystems.

Other submissions raised concerns about the Aboriginal Water Reserve, suggesting that it should be 'notional' where the system is already over-allocated and, where available, have clear implementation pathways.

Some submissions recommended that the 11 statutory licence decision considerations under section 90(1AA) of the Water Act should be explicitly listed in the Plan, and that trade rules prohibiting trade between groundwater management zones should be included in the Plan. Submissions also suggested that the department should engage with relevant Indigenous economic development organisations to support Aboriginal economic development opportunities associated with the AWR.

Water allocation and licensing	No. of mentions	How we heard feedback	Who mentioned it	Feedback sentiment
	15	 6 written submissions  1 surveys  8 direct engagements	PWC, ALEC, DKA, community members	 10 concerned  5 mixed  0 supportive

4.4.1. Responding

The department acknowledges the strong support for protection of existing water entitlements, calls for impact assessments for trades and relocations, and requests for greater transparency in licensing decisions.

The *Water Act 1992* requires the Controller of Water Resources to consider water allocation plans when making licensing decisions (including trading water entitlements). The Controller considers water availability, existing demand and potential impacts on other users and beneficial uses. The plan does not automatically licence water for extraction, it guides decision making for licensing.

The plan allocates water within the ESY to beneficial uses, including public water supply, rural stock and domestic use, the environment, Aboriginal economic development through the Aboriginal Water Reserve, and other economic uses. Existing licences continue to be managed in accordance with the *Water Act 1992*, and licensing decisions must take account of relevant risks to and potential impacts on existing beneficial uses, including public water supply. Potential impacts on water quantity and quality are considered. Additional licensing rules have been incorporated into the Plan document to ensure public water supply is protected.

Since 2020, the *Water Act 1992* has required Aboriginal water reserves to be established if there is eligible Aboriginal land with access to the water resource when a water allocation plan is declared. The plan documents explain how the Aboriginal Water Reserve is set aside within the ESY for the economic benefit of eligible Aboriginal landowners and how it is applied through the Plan term, consistent with the NT's Strategic Aboriginal Water Reserves Policy Framework⁷.

4.5. Environmental and cultural values

The draft plan identified groundwater dependent ecosystems and acknowledges Aboriginal cultural connections to water. It included an objective to document, monitor, and account for Aboriginal cultural water values.

⁷ NT Government, Strategic Aboriginal Water Reserves Policy Framework (Department of Lands, Planning and Environment). Available at: [Strategic Aboriginal Water Reserves Policy Framework](#)

Many submissions commented that Aboriginal cultural values must be protected, not just documented and monitored. Traditional Owners expressed disappointment that the Plan was drafted without consulting them first. They emphasised that cultural values are living and connected to water, and that sacred trees and water places depend on groundwater.

Other submissions indicated that immediate protections should be implemented for all groundwater dependent ecosystems across shallow basins, suggesting that the Plan only considers deep-rooting trees in the Todd River area while ignoring other GDEs such as stygofauna, ghost gums, coolibahs, wetlands and claypans. Several submissions noted that only 0.91% of the ESY is allocated to the environment, which was considered insufficient.

"Water is life. Water planning must be evidence-based, protect culture and support future generations." – Traditional Owner feedback via Central Land Council

Environmental and cultural values	No. of mentions	How we heard feedback	Who mentioned it	Feedback sentiment
	25	 9 written submissions  10 surveys  6 direct engagements	ALEC, CLC, AAPA, community members, anonymous survey respondents	 20 concerned  5 mixed  0 supportive

4.5.1. Responding

The department acknowledges the strong support from submissions for the protection of environmental and cultural water values.

The plan documents contain several provisions to enable the protection of environmental and cultural water values and outlines several actions to continue to develop these provisions. The background report acknowledges both groundwater-dependent ecosystems (GDEs) and water places with cultural significance as priority assets and describes the unique features of those found in the plan area.

Objective 2 of the plan outlines requirements to document, monitor and account for Aboriginal cultural water values. The department is committed to reaching this objective through implementation action 3.2. Several other implementation actions further investigation and monitoring activities of ecosystems and the water resources that support them while also considering regulatory tools for the protection of GDEs.

Specifically, the plan includes a depth-to-water threshold of 8 metres below ground level in the Todd River corridor to protect groundwater-dependent ecosystems. The map of the Todd River corridor within the Town management zone is included in the plan document. This depth-to-water threshold has not been applied to other groundwater management zones because the average depth-to-water exceeds 8 metres below ground level and commercial water extraction is minimal.

The department monitors 25 groundwater sites and 8 surface water sites in the Plan area. Groundwater quality is monitored within the Town Basin, Outer Farm Basin and the Mereenie Aquifer System across 6 groundwater monitoring bores. Following re-inclusion of the Wannardi and Inner Farm groundwater management zones, an additional 5 groundwater monitoring sites have been added to the monitoring program within the plan area.

The department is committed to improving the incorporation of environmental and cultural values into water management. This includes the planned engagement to better inform the identification and understanding of cultural values. The implementation actions include activities intended to improve information on Aboriginal cultural values and other values associated with water over the plan term.

4.6. Social and economic values

The plan recognises the role of groundwater in supporting the Alice Springs community, including public drinking water security and economic activity dependent on water access.

17% (5) of submissions commented on the long-term risks to drinking water security. PWC and one other respondent noted that issues of bore efficiency and high extraction costs arise as pumping depth increases at Roe Creek borefield, and with declining groundwater levels, pumping approaches economic limits, all of which constrain future public water supply - despite the significant volume of groundwater remaining in the aquifer due to its expanse and depth.

"The 50 years water table graphics of Roe Creek, Outer Farm and Town Basin clearly show that we are taking too much water out of these shallow aquifers." – Survey Participant

Other submissions called for drinking water supplies to be safeguarded and made to last as long as possible, with some expressing concern that use of finite drinking water reserves for irrigation is wasteful. The groundwater extracted from the Mereenie Aquifer System is largely non-renewable, given the minimal groundwater recharge that occurs. Several submissions emphasised that every person, business, ecosystem, and cultural site depends on prudent water extraction, and that community and economic growth and the delivery of associated increased water needs should be anticipated in long-term planning.

Social and economic values	No. of mentions	How we heard feedback	Who mentioned it	Feedback sentiment
	19	 4 written submissions  7 surveys  8 direct engagements	PWC, DKA, community members, anonymous survey respondents	 12 concerned  7 mixed  0 supportive

4.6.1. Responding

The department acknowledges stakeholder concern regarding the long-term security of drinking water for Alice Springs, the economic constraints of deep groundwater extraction, and the importance of balancing protection with economic development.

The plan establishes extraction limits designed to manage groundwater use over the plan period. The plan recognises public water supply as a priority use and maintains existing allocations for Power and Water Corporation's operations.

The background report reflects the socio-economic values that the water resources support as identified by stakeholders in their submissions. It provides the foundational evidence that informed the plan's approach to protection of social and economic values relating to water. The report documents the critical role of groundwater in supporting the Alice Springs community, quantifies current extraction patterns and describes the distribution of licensed and unlicensed water use across the plan area. The report acknowledges that the Mereenie Aquifer System contains palaeowater with limited modern recharge, and that extraction constitutes managed depletion of storage over time.

Critically, the report identifies that groundwater levels at Rocky Hill, the future potable water source for Alice Springs, are shallower than at Roe Creek. Analysis of extraction patterns, aquifer characteristics and water levels and water extraction trends in the Mereenie Aquifer System informed the extraction limits and management zone boundaries established in the plan.

Action 3.1.1 of the implementation actions commits the department to further investigation of groundwater flow mechanisms. Such assessments, in conjunction with the department’s monitoring program, will be used to inform future adaptive water resource management and will be incorporated into the next plan review.

Stakeholders raised concerns about Power and Water’s extraction and whether it was approaching economic limits at the Roe Creek borefield as pumping depths increase. Stakeholders requested explicit recognition of Rocky Hill as a future public water supply area with protections made to preserve lower-salinity groundwater zones. The plan does not include groundwater protection zones of these borefields. The plan supports optimal use of water resources across the plan area, and the department works with users, including Power and Water, to improve characterisation and understanding of water resources across the plan area, to improve water management

Section 4.4 of the plan has been incorporated to provide the Controller of Water Resources with additional items of consideration when making a decision on a water licence application.

4.7. Plan implementation

The draft plan was accompanied by a draft implementation actions (2026-2036) report that set out monitoring programs, management triggers, and actions to be undertaken over the plan period.

13% (4) of submissions commented that the implementation actions are lacking sufficient detail, accountability and timely delivery. Submissions frequently noted that recommendations from the 2021 Technical Review have largely not been delivered, and that meaningful protections for groundwater dependent ecosystems are delayed despite the system already being under pressure.

"The Draft Implementation Actions largely fail to address all the gaps identified, are weak in scope and vague regarding commitment." – CLC submission

Other submissions inferred that the implementation actions report treats the Mereenie Aquifer System as uniform and omit critical elements such as Rocky Hill transition planning, salinity-based triggers, and early-warning indicators. Several submissions recommended that monitoring programs need expansion, that adaptive management mechanisms require clear triggers for review or response, and that rate of drawdown must be considered in addition to absolute depth thresholds.

	No. of mentions	How we heard feedback	Who mentioned it	Feedback sentiment
Plan implementation	17	7 written submissions 8 surveys 2 direct engagements	PWC, CLC, ALEC, DKA, community members, anonymous survey respondents	16 concerned 1 mixed 0 supportive

4.7.1. Responding

The department acknowledges feedback that implementation actions in the draft plan are perceived as weak, vague, or delayed, and that recommendations from the 2021 Technical Review have not been fully delivered.

The Alice Springs water allocation plan 2016-2026 – Technical Review and the associated Review Report were published in 2021⁸. These reports document the department's progress on actions including updated groundwater modelling for the Mereenie Aquifer System and the 2025 Water Resource Assessment².

The implementation actions for the plan set out a structured program of monitoring, investigation, and management actions over the ten-year plan period. The implementation actions are organised to align with the objectives of the water allocation plan and are assigned timeframes for completion. Progress on implementation actions and new information obtained through monitoring and investigations will inform the statutory five-year review of the plan.

Following public feedback, additional monitoring bores have been added to the monitoring program to ensure coverage of the Wannardi groundwater management zone, amendments have been made to some actions including, actions under Aboriginal and other cultural values brought forward to 2028-2031 and the Aquifer Protection study brought forward, now 2026-2029.

4.8. Governance and consultation

Although a Committee had previously been established in the Alice Springs water plan area, as described in Section 3 there was insufficient expression of interest to form a Committee for this updated plan.

The department undertook standard engagement activities for water allocation plans, including direct engagement with stakeholders and public exhibition of the draft plan documents.

Several submissions commented that a Committee should have been established prior to development of the draft plan. Stakeholders stated that the absence of a Committee limited community oversight of plan development and reduced opportunities for stakeholder and Traditional Owner input.

*"The draft plan has been developed without a WAC which means Traditional Owners, affected communities and key stakeholders have had no input into or oversight of how the draft plan was developed." – **ALEC submission***

Other submissions indicated that public consultation was unclear and inadequate, noting that public meetings and targeted stakeholder briefings did not constitute meaningful community engagement. Several submissions expressed concern that the new three-document structure (Plan, Background Report, Implementation Actions) weakens the legal force of water plans by removing critical information from the statutory document considered by the Controller. Some respondents noted that flooding during the consultation period further limited community engagement and called for the comment period to be reopened and extended.

Supportive feedback related to the role of Committee's generally as a positive governance mechanism and the overall value of water planning frameworks.

*"Many people found the issues too difficult to understand sufficiently enough to give informed feedback." – **Community submission***

⁸ Alice Springs Water Allocation Plan 2016-2026 – Technical Review (territorystories.nt.gov.au)

Governance and consultation	No. of mentions	How we heard feedback	Who mentioned it	Feedback sentiment
	34	 14 written submissions  10 surveys  10 direct engagements	CLC, ALEC, DKA, community members, licence holders, anonymous survey respondents	 31 concerned  1 mixed  2 supportive

4.8.1. Responding

The department acknowledges the significant feedback regarding the absence of a Committee during the drafting of the Plan and concerns about the adequacy of public consultation.

The department sought to establish a Committee prior to development of the draft plan but did not receive sufficient levels of response for membership. The department drafted the Plan and undertook direct engagement with stakeholders including a public comment period through Have Your Say between 16 February 2026 and 17 March 2026, as documented in Schedule 1.

The Minister can appoint a Committee during the Plan period, if it is sought.

The department also acknowledges that public consultation was affected by flooding during the consultation period and that some stakeholders found the engagement process unclear or inadequate. Due to this, additional time to provide a submission was granted for those stakeholders who requested extensions to ensure feedback could be received.

The Plan documents are structured as a statutory plan supported by a Background Report and Implementation Actions. The statutory plan is the document declared under the *Water Act 1992*. The plan documents also note that the Controller must consider a water allocation plan when making relevant decisions, and that the Background Report and Implementation Actions may be taken into account where relevant.

The Implementation Actions include provisions for public engagement over the Plan term, including reporting on monitoring results and progress against Implementation Actions.

No changes to plan documents have been made in response to this theme.

Schedule 1. Direct engagement – consultation register

Date	Stakeholders	Format	Purpose
14 Jan 2026	CLC; DLPE; ASTC; PWC; Lhere Artepe Aboriginal Corporation	Email	Inform stakeholders of plan expiry and upcoming consultation
21–22 Jan 2026	Lhere Artepe Aboriginal Corporation; Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC); Alice Springs Golf Club	Email / phone	Initiate engagement and schedule pre-consultation meetings
28–29 Jan 2026	NT Government staff; PWC; CLC; NIAA; DKA; ASTC; ALEC; Alice Springs Golf Club	Meetings (in-person)	Early engagement to introduce draft plan, outline approach and gather initial feedback
16 Feb 2026	Key stakeholders (PWC, CLC, ALEC, DKA, NIAA, Lhere Artepe Aboriginal Corporation, Alice Springs Golf Club, ASTC, industry and government representatives)	Email	Release of draft plan and commencement of public consultation
19–28 Feb 2026	NIAA; CLC; PWC; industry and community stakeholders	Email / phone	Invite stakeholders to briefings and provide information on consultation process
3 Mar 2026	NT Government staff; regional stakeholders; community members; licence holders	Meetings (in-person)	Present draft plan and gather feedback on key issues including ESY, licensing and AWR
4 Mar 2026	Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA); ALEC; NIAA	Meetings (in-person)	Targeted consultation on environmental, cultural and policy considerations
9–10 Mar 2026	ALEC; CLC; PWC; Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network; community stakeholders;	Email / phone	Invitation for briefings Communicate extension of consultation period and continue stakeholder engagement
11 Mar 2026	Past Water Advisory Committee members; DKA; Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation; regional stakeholders	Email / meeting	Provide updates, invite feedback, and present draft plan
12 Mar 2026	CLC and Traditional Owners; broader Alice Springs community; ABC radio audience	Meeting / media (radio)	Public presentation and community awareness
13 Mar 2026	Community members; technical experts; former Water Advisory Committee members	Phone / email / presentation	Present draft plan, respond to enquiries and capture detailed feedback
16–19 Mar 2026	PWC; Lhere Artepe; community stakeholders	Email	Provide consultation extensions and respond to stakeholder requests
25 Mar 2026	PWC; NT Government staff	Meetings (in-person)	Detailed consultation on water security, licensing, and economic development considerations

Schedule 2. What we heard and how we responded – feedback register

Theme	Summary	Stakeholders	DLPE response
Water resource information and scientific basis	Stakeholders commented that: - there is insufficient scientific understanding of hydrogeological heterogeneity, vertical connectivity between aquifers and recharge/discharge dynamics - current monitoring coverage is insufficient and dual, or nested monitoring bores are required - the technical explanations fail to draw the link between findings and how groundwater is impacted by extraction - key definitions (e.g., Mereenie Aquifer System) are unclear and need unequivocal definition - the Background Report relies on outdated sources (e.g., Knapton 2016) and does not cite later works - figures are partly unreadable and the science is not easily understood by non-scientists - modelling work (Knapton, 2022) should be available for public scrutiny - results from Geoscience Australia's Exploring for the Future program are not mentioned	PWC, CLC, ALEC, DKA, community members, anonymous survey respondents	DLPE notes that the Plan is informed by long-term monitoring, recent hydrogeological investigations, updated modelling and the 2025 water resource assessment. DLPE acknowledges requests for clearer explanation of the science and notes that the Background Report, Implementation Actions and supporting communication materials are intended to improve transparency and accessibility for non-specialists. The department has improved clarity of graphics for more effective communication. No substantial changes have been made to the Plan.
Management zones	Stakeholders commented that: - the Inner Farm and Wanngardí Groundwater Management Zones must be retained, not removed - the rationale for removing these zones has not been clearly communicated or justified - removing zones leaves shallow aquifers vulnerable to increased extraction without adequate protection - lumping Mereenie, Pacoota and Shannon/Goyder aquifers into a single zone risks localised over-abstraction	PWC, CLC, ALEC, community members, licence holders, anonymous survey respondents	DLPE acknowledges the strong feedback regarding the proposed consolidation of management zones. In response to public feedback, Inner Farm and Wanngardí have been re-included as management zones in the Plan, with conservative allocations, ongoing monitoring and Implementation Actions to support their management over the Plan term. The Mereenie Aquifer System remains consolidated with management rules included in the water allocation

	- the Wanngard Basin is significant to rural residents including caravan parks and is documented as oversubscribed - management zones should align with hydrogeological flow paths and natural compartments - sub-management rules for each aquifer system should be reintroduced		plan to ensure water availability and water quality are protected.
Sustainable yield	Stakeholders commented that: - the proposed ESY increases (e.g., Town Basin from 1,000 ML/year to ~3,100 ML/year) are not supported by available evidence - applying a single ESY across different aquifer systems conceals major hydrological and economic differences - using the term "sustainable" is misleading when groundwater reserves are finite and extraction exceeds recharge - the ESY should recognise that economic and operational depth limits, not total aquifer storage, constrain extraction - separate ESYs should be set for Town Basin, Outer Farm Basin, and Mereenie Aquifer System sub-areas - the ESY already greatly exceeds recharge and should not be increased - a simple water balance approach is inadequate for a system of such cultural, ecological, and public water supply importance.	PWC, CLC, ALEC, community members, anonymous survey respondents	DLPE acknowledges concerns regarding the proposed estimated sustainable yield (ESY) settings and the application of a single ESY across different aquifer systems. DLPE advises that the ESY settings have been reviewed and revised following consultation with a conservative approach to maintain ESY at/near current allocation levels as considered acceptable under the Alice Springs water allocation plan 2016-2026, with supporting justification updated across the Plan documents. Future review will continue to be informed by monitoring, Implementation Actions and new data. For clarity, an ESY is set for each groundwater management zone and is not transferrable across zones. The term "estimated sustainable yield" is a requirement under section 22B(5) of the <i>Water Act 1992</i> and is not dependent on groundwater resources being finite or otherwise.
Water allocation and licensing	Stakeholders commented that: - existing public water supply licences must remain protected under the new plan - hydrogeological impact assessments should be required for trades and relocations	PWC, ALEC, DKA, community members	The DLPE acknowledges feedback regarding protection of public water supply, licensing transparency, trades and implementation of the Aboriginal Water Reserve. DLPE notes that licensing decisions continue to be made under the <i>Water Act 1992</i>, with the plan guiding allocation settings and decision-making, and that relevant risks, existing uses and beneficial uses are

	- trade between groundwater management zones should be explicitly prohibited - the Draft Plan lacks clear licensing rules, enforcement mechanisms, and accountability measures - the best quality water must continue to be reserved for public water supplies - the Aboriginal Water Reserve should be 'notional' where systems are already over-allocated, and where available, have clear implementation pathways - the AWR is not ring-fenced and allocations against this commitment will lag behind other categories - the 11 statutory licence decision considerations should be explicitly listed in the Plan for transparency.		considered in administration of the resource. Existing licences remain governed by the Water Act, and new rules in the plan strengthen protection of public water supply. The Aboriginal Water Reserve is established within the ESY and eligible land has been identified in the plan.
Environmental and cultural water values	Stakeholders commented that: - Traditional Owners stressed that cultural values are living and connected to water, and the Draft Plan fails to protect sacred trees and water places - Aboriginal cultural values must be protected, not just documented and monitored - immediate protections should be implemented for all groundwater dependent ecosystems across shallow basins - the 8m below ground level threshold should apply wherever extraction draws from shallow groundwater, not just along the Todd River corridor - groundwater dependent ecosystems such as stygofauna, ghost gums, coolibahs, wetlands and claypans remain unprotected - the Plan only considers deep-rooting trees in the Todd River area and ignores other GDEs - water-dependent sacred sites in the Outer Farm zone are of equal significance to those in Town Basin	ALEC, CLC, AAPA, community members, anonymous survey respondents	DLPE acknowledges the strong feedback regarding environmental and cultural water values, including the need to better protect groundwater dependent ecosystems and Aboriginal cultural values. DLPE notes that the Plan and Implementation Actions include provisions for monitoring, investigation and continued work with Traditional Owners to better identify, understand and protect these values over time. The department recognises improvements are needed and will enhance engagement and knowledge of cultural values over time. Following feedback, ongoing monitoring has been expanded to include bores in Wannardi groundwater management zone. The plan includes a depth-to-water threshold in the Todd River, within the Town management zone to protect GDEs. In response to feedback regarding depth-to-water thresholds in other shallow basins, depth-to-water fluctuates and on average is deeper than 8 mBGL in other the shallow basins. Further work is required through Implementation Actions to identify

	- Traditional Owners should have been consulted before the Plan was drafted - only 0.91% of the ESY is allocated to the environment, which is nominal and insufficient.		and justify appropriate depth-to-water thresholds for all basins.
Social and economic values	Stakeholders commented that: - as pumping depth increases, well losses grow, energy consumption rises and bore efficiency declines, making extraction more expensive - every person, business, ecosystem, and cultural site depends on aquifer integrity - drinking water supplies should be safeguarded and made to last as long as possible - the use of finite drinking water reserves for irrigation is an unnecessary waste - increased salinity risks will shift costs to people as Power and Water treat water more - growth and increased water needs should be anticipated - the needs of humans to have safe drinking water should be preserved at all costs.	PWC, DKA, community members, anonymous survey respondents	DLPE acknowledges feedback regarding long-term drinking water security, the cost and feasibility of deeper extraction, and the need to balance protection with future economic use. DLPE notes that the plan recognises public water supply as a priority use and that supporting technical documents provide context on groundwater conditions, extraction patterns and future planning considerations relevant to social and economic values. Monitoring and further studies will inform future decisions. Section 4.4 of the Plan has been incorporated to provide the Controller of Water Resources with additional items of consideration when making a decision on a water licence application.
Plan implementation	Stakeholders commented that: - the Implementation Actions treat the Mereenie Aquifer System as uniform and omit Rocky Hill planning - Implementation Actions lack salinity-based triggers and early-warning indicators - recommendations from the 2021 Technical Review have not been delivered - Implementation Actions are weak, vague, and delayed (e.g., GDE protections delayed until 2030-2033)	PWC, CLC, ALEC, DKA, community members, anonymous survey respondents	DLPE acknowledges feedback that Implementation Actions should be clearer, stronger and delivered earlier. Following feedback, delivery timeframes have been reviewed and some timeframes adjusted. DLPE notes that the Implementation Actions set out a structured program of monitoring, investigation and management activities over the plan period that align with the objectives of the water plan. Progress on these actions, together with new information, may inform ongoing adaptive management and future statutory review of the plan.

	- monitoring programs need expansion to improve recharge and discharge estimates - adaptive management mechanisms and clear triggers for review or response are needed - rate of drawdown must be considered in addition to absolute depth thresholds.		Additional monitoring bores have been added to the monitoring program for the Wannardi management zone.
Governance and consultation	Stakeholders commented that: - a Water Advisory Committee should have been established before drafting the Plan, and is essential for proper Traditional Owner involvement - Traditional Owners expressed disappointment that the Plan was drafted without consulting them first - public consultation was unclear and inadequate, with conflicting messages about meetings - closed stakeholder meetings do not equate to public consultation - the public comment period should be reopened and extended - the new three-document structure weakens the legal force of water plans and undermines democratic accountability - the Division had ample time to improve engagement but did not - many people found the issues too difficult to understand sufficiently to give informed feedback - flooding during the consultation period further limited community engagement.	CLC, ALEC, DKA, community members, licence holders, anonymous survey respondents	DLPE acknowledges feedback regarding governance, consultation approach and the absence of a Water Advisory Committee (Committee) during drafting of the plan. Initial attempts to establish a Committee were unsuccessful, however, a Committee may still be established during the plan period if considered appropriate. DLPE notes that direct engagement and public consultation were undertaken following plan development. The plan is supported by the background and implementation documents and are intended to improve transparency, reporting and ongoing engagement. No changes have been made to the plan in response to this theme.