DHARRIWAA ELDERS GROUP

Notes to contribute towards the preparation of the Interim Update of the Productivity Commission's 2026 Review of the National Water Initiative. 24 April 2026.

Introduction

Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) is a longstanding Walgett Aboriginal community-controlled organization (ACCO), an incorporated charity which began operating as an association in 2000 after starting as a program of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service in the late 1990s. Its Full Members are Aboriginal people living in Walgett over the age of 60, and has been driven from its earliest days to act upon the deteriorating wellbeing of the waterways in its area of interest in a critical floodplain in the Northern Murray Darling Basin.

Walgett is a river town of about 2,100 people, the majority Aboriginal. Walgett is where the Baawan (Barwon) and Ngamaay (Namoi) Rivers and many creeks, warrambuls and lakes meet in a large floodplain wetland, upstream of Bourke. It is beside the end of the Wambuul (Macquarie River). Walgett is now home to Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay, Ngiyambaa and Wayilwan Aboriginal Nations, as well other Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people.

Rivers and shallow groundwaters fed by the rivers have always been, and remain, central, to Walgett culture and life. For Aboriginal people, the health of the rivers and people are totally connected.

DEG members live with the drastic and measurable decline in river flows and river health. This is due to over extraction upstream and a failure to halt irrigation growth. We know what the solutions are to this situation. They include a strong, truly independent, fully funded regulator in the Murray-Darling Basin which is culturally and institutionally designed to be transparent and with a focus on enforcement. They also include strong Commonwealth responses to redress the balance currently benefitting irrigators, to rebuild the health of rivers and waterways and recognize the continuing dispossession of waterways from Aboriginal communities' enjoyment.

Our members and community are expected to live without access to free, safe drinking water because the rivers are polluted with industrial contaminants and nutrients and our local water utility is not supported to properly supply Great Artesian Basin (GAB) water for drinking. We know what the solutions for this are, and they include reverse-osmosis treatment of GAB combined with appropriate wastewater solutions, increased Water Utility staff and the introduction of a Universal Service Obligation for safe, accessible drinking water.

All solutions require fearless examination of the facts using available science and observance of legislative objects and requirements. This is why we need the Productivity Commission to hold Commonwealth and State Government to account and provide options for improvement in implementation.

Dharriwaa Elders Group is well informed on water management in the Murray-Darling Basin. Our level of understanding is demonstrated in the many submissions we have made to various consultative processes. These are available on our website[1].

We are currently preparing our input into the Reviews of the Water Act and the Murray Darling Basin Plan. For this reason we do not have the resources to provide a full initial submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the National Water Initiative, **but intend to make a submission in response to your Interim Update.** In this submission we will make some responses

[1] https://dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/reports

to your Call for Submissions for your proposed Interim Update, and would welcome any opportunities to participate in public hearings.

In the meantime we ask that you consider the careful observations and recommendations we made to the Reviews in 2020 and 2024. While we can provide some situation updates, and policy we have developed in regards to Floodplain Harvesting licencing and other practices that we consider unlawful in water management, we can assure you that nothing has substantially changed since those submissions were prepared, and our recommendations made in 2020 and 2024 still apply.

- Recommendations for the Review of the National Water Initiative. A submission to the Productivity Commission - Review of the National Water Initiative from Dharriwaa Elders Group and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service 11 September 2020[2].
- Productivity Commission Inquiry into the National Water Initiative Submission from Dharriwaa Elders Group Walgett 16 February 2024[3].

Comments on Table 1 – Key priorities for the three-year assessment period commencing 2024[4]

We could speak to the Key Priorities for the three-year assessment beginning from 2024, for NSW and the Commonwealth, but in the meantime offer the following:

NSW

We have made submissions[5] [6] [7] to the Natural Resources Commission regarding its reviews of Water Sharing Plans in DEG's area of interest, we have made recommendations in the Review of the Inspector General of Water Compliance regarding the accreditation of Water Resource Plans, and we have made many submissions to the NSW and Commonwealth Ministers regarding the unlawfulness of licencing Floodplain Harvesting.

Commonwealth

We have made recommendations regarding water infrastructure projects in submissions regarding the Restoring our Rivers[8] and Toolkit Measures[9],[10].

Comments on Table 2 – Findings[11]

We could speak to the Findings from the PC review in 2024, and would have many useful observations to make regarding Findings 6.2, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 9.1, 9.2 and in the meantime offer the following contributions to your Interim Update:

[2] https://dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/Productivity%20Commission%20Submission%20-%20SEPTEMBER%202020.pdf
[3] https://dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/FinalDEGsubmissiontoPCreviewofNWI16Feb2024.pdf
[4] National Water Reform 2026 – Call for submissions page 12
[5] https://dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/DEGtoNRCreGwydirRegulatedRiverWSP24Sept2023.pdf
[6] https://dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/DEGSubmissiontoNRCApril2025NamoiMacquarieWSP.pdf
[7] https://dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/DEGResponsetoDraftWSPs15October2025.pdf
[8] https://dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/DEGtoSenateInquiryRestoreOurRiversBillOct2023.pdf
[9] https://dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/DEGSubmissionIGWC%20inquiry%20Northern%20Basin%20Toolkit29Nov24.pdf
[10] https://dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/DEGStatementreToolkitMeasuresFishways5August2025.pdf
[11] National Water Reform 2026 – Call for submissions page 15

- It is unacceptable that water, the lifeblood of peoples and Country has been made a tradeable financial product.
- Water infrastructure funds should not be expended without independent, transparent assessment of business cases that value community and environmental benefits and impacts.
- Public and environmental health outcomes must be defined, delivered, measured and reported in ways acceptable to us including audits.
- Despite commitments to ensure irrigation water is delivered on a cost-recovery basis, this does not appear to be implemented. The Commonwealth and NSW governments are regularly required to contribute to river infrastructure that is only required by irrigators and is usually negatively impacting communities and the environment. These irrigator infrastructure business cases do not examine the options for removing weirs instead of spending millions on fishways (for example) and lobbyists are pushing today expensive pipeline projects for conveying town water supplies without adequate business cases.
- Walgett needs safe, low sodium free drinking water and our community needs to trust the drinking water delivered to it by the local Water Utility. The supply of water with elevated levels of sodium in Walgett regularly exceeds Australian Drinking Water palatability guidelines and is exacerbating corrosion problems in the plumbing infrastructure causing further health concerns. There are no guidelines for healthy levels of sodium in drinking water (which are needed). A Universal Service Obligation framework for funding local governments' water utility operations and capital requirements would assist.
- Publication of drinking water quality data for the public is essential and is still not delivered despite NSW Water Group saying in a NSW Estimates hearing[12] that it is.

[12] NSW Estimates 9 September 2024