



Fitzroy Basin
water resource plan
draft amendment
Isaac–Connors catchment
information report

December 2006

Published by:
Department of Natural Resources and Water
GPO Box 2454
Brisbane Qld 4001

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ISBN 1 74172 242 X (print)
ISBN 1 74172 243 8 (online)
#28054

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Department of Natural Resources and Water
December 2006
Reprinted January 2007

Message from the minister

The groundwater resources in the Isaac–Connors catchment play an important part in supporting the region’s economy, natural heritage and biodiversity. Managing the groundwater systems to ensure their sustainability will play an essential part in supporting the future development of the region while protecting its valuable natural assets.

In partnership with our clients and stakeholders, the Department of Natural Resources and Water (NRW) is committed to delivering sustainable water management in line with the state’s commitment to the National Water Initiative. This will ensure that reliable water supplies are maintained into the future, while the environmental integrity of our groundwater related ecosystems is protected.

As part of Queensland’s water planning process, this information report has been prepared to assist in the developing of an amendment to the existing water resource plan for the Fitzroy Basin to include the groundwater resources in the Isaac–Connors catchment. The report provides useful background information to assist the community to participate in the planning process.

Groundwater systems in the Isaac–Connors catchment are showing signs of stress at a time when water is most needed. This is compounded by increasing demand for water and a continuing drought.

There is a pressing need to ensure that groundwater allocation and management strategies are implemented to protect the region’s prosperity and its natural heritage and biodiversity values.

I have therefore announced my intention to amend the existing *Water Resource (Fitzroy Basin) Plan 1999* to include the groundwater resources in the Isaac–Connors catchment.

I encourage everyone with an interest in these important resources to take the opportunity to participate in the planning process, and to contribute to the development of a draft amendment through the formal submissions process.

The Hon. Craig Wallace, MP
Minister for Natural Resources and Water and
Minister Assisting the Premier in North Queensland



Connors River at Mount Bridget

How to make a submission

Individuals, groups and other interested parties are invited to contribute to the development of the proposal to amend the *Water Resource (Fitzroy Basin) Plan* with respect to the Isaac-Connors catchment. Submissions should focus on the issues pertinent to developing the draft amendment.

Submissions must be written and include the name, address and signature of each person making the submission. An authorised officer (such as the executive officer or secretary of a committee) must sign submissions made by entities or interest groups. Respondents should clearly outline their issue of concern and include facts that support their submission. Email submissions will also be accepted and will be considered to have been written and signed.

A submission form is provided in Appendix E.

A nomination form for membership of the community reference panel is provided in Appendix F.

Submissions must be received by February 23, 2007.

Submissions can be posted, emailed or faxed to:

The Chief Executive
Department of Natural Resources and Water
Attention: Mr. Ed Donohue
PO Box 1762
Rockhampton Qld 4700
Email: isaacconnors.wrp@nrm.qld.gov.au
Fax: (07) 4938 4011

More information

Enquiries can also be directed to Mr. Roland Lee on 1800 822 100.

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1. Overview

1.1 Purpose of the information report

The release of this information report accompanies an announcement by the Minister for Natural Resources and Water (the minister) about the intention to prepare an amendment to the *Water Resource (Fitzroy Basin) Plan 1999* to include groundwater in the Isaac–Connors subcatchment.

The purpose of the report is to:

- explain the amendment process
- support public involvement in the proposed amendment
- provide a resource for individuals and groups wishing to prepare submissions on the amendment.

This information report provides details about:

- the purpose of the draft amendment
- the proposed amendment area and the water resources to which the amendment will apply
- characteristics of the Isaac–Connors catchment and current water resource development in the proposed amendment area
- key water issues that will affect the preparation of the draft amendment
- how the public will be consulted
- proposed arrangements for the technical assessments of environmental, hydrologic, economic and social factors to support the planning process
- how to make a submission about the proposed draft amendment.

All submissions will be considered in preparing the draft amendment before its release, at which point a second phase for public review and comment will begin. All submissions received on the contents of the draft amendment will be considered before the finalisation of the water resource plan (WRP).

1.2 Background

In 2004 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), of which Queensland is a member, released the National Water Initiative. Building upon the 1994 National Water Reform framework, the aims of the National Water Initiative include:

- To promote both economic and water-use efficiency, notably by introducing trading, where practicable, to allow water to move to high-value uses.
- To improve security and certainty for water users to support confident forward planning through clearly defined entitlements that specify volume and reliability of supply.
- To provide water to maintain healthy ecosystems.
- To engage stakeholders in the water reform process.
- To ensure adequate monitoring and reporting of water use.

In Queensland, the *Water Act 2000* (the Act) was introduced to provide a legislative basis for satisfying these and other water resource management issues. Under the Act, the minister is responsible for planning the allocation and sustainable management of water resources. This includes the protection of natural ecosystems and the security of supply for water users.

Before the water reform process began, water entitlements were issued on an incremental basis and often without a full understanding of key ecological and hydrological impacts.

The water planning process improves the knowledge base that underpins water allocation and management, and seeks to provide greater certainty for water users. This creates greater confidence in water planning and decision making.

1.3 Purpose of a water resource plan

A WRP provides for the management of existing water resources to preserve community and industry benefits, while recognising the importance of maintaining healthy ecosystems.

Under the Act the WRP provides a framework for sustainable water management. This is based on assessing:

- water availability in the context of climatic variability, and community and environmental needs
- community response to the economic opportunities associated with the use of water resources within a plan area. These include consumptive uses such as agricultural, industrial and urban uses, and non-consumptive uses such as tourism, recreation and fisheries
- sources of future demand, including opportunities and needs arising from growth in existing and emerging activities, and the growing population associated with the state’s diversifying and increasingly regionalised economy.

From these and other considerations the draft WRP is developed to provide for:

- secure supplies for existing users
- water management strategies that support stated ecological outcomes
- a water allocation and management strategy
- a foundation for future planning.

1.4 Preparation of a water resource plan

The water resource planning process involves the following phases:

- pre-planning, including public submissions on any issues of concern
- establishment of a community reference panel (CRP)
- development of a draft amendment

- public review and submissions on the draft
- refinement and finalisation
- implementation through a resource operations plan.

The water resource planning process is illustrated in Figure 1. The process for developing an amendment to an existing water resource plan is identical.

1.5 Preparation of a draft amendment

Following a pre-planning phase (which involves initial data collection, preliminary community consultation and preparation of an information report), the draft amendment development phase begins. This point in the process has now been reached for the Isaac-Connors subcatchment.

The development phase is initiated when the minister announces the intention to prepare an amendment to a WRP for the proposed area. At the same time, an information report is released and initial public submissions are invited. The notice of intention to prepare a draft amendment sets out:

- the reasons for the proposed amendment
- the proposed amendment plan area
- the water referred to in the amendment
- where copies of the information report may be obtained
- where and when submissions may be lodged.

During the development phase, important information from technical studies, including assessments of hydrologic, environmental and economic and social factors, is examined. The community reference panel, formed to advise the minister on matters relevant to developing the plan, also provides input and comment on this information.

When the draft amendment is released by the minister for public review and comment, it is accompanied by an overview report that summarises the

findings of the technical assessments and outlines the provisions in the document, including any approaches or scenarios for sustainably managing the water resources in the area.

1.6 Release of the draft amendment

On release of the draft amendment, a further public review phase begins. Formal submissions are invited, all of which must be considered before the plan is finalised.

Within 30 business days of the approval of the final plan, the minister must prepare a report that summarises the issues raised through the consultation process and how they were dealt with in the preparation of the amendment.

1.7 Release of the final plan

Once approved by the Governor-in-Council, the finalised, amended WRP becomes subordinate legislation to the *Water Act 2000*.

The implementation phase occurs principally through the development of a resource operations plan (ROP). A ROP sets out the day-to-day rules for the taking of water and for operating water infrastructure within a plan or amendment area.

The ROP also deals with any requirements for water entitlements to convert to tradable allocations and establishes trading rules. In addition, it details arrangements for monitoring the effectiveness of the implemented WRP.

The water resource planning process

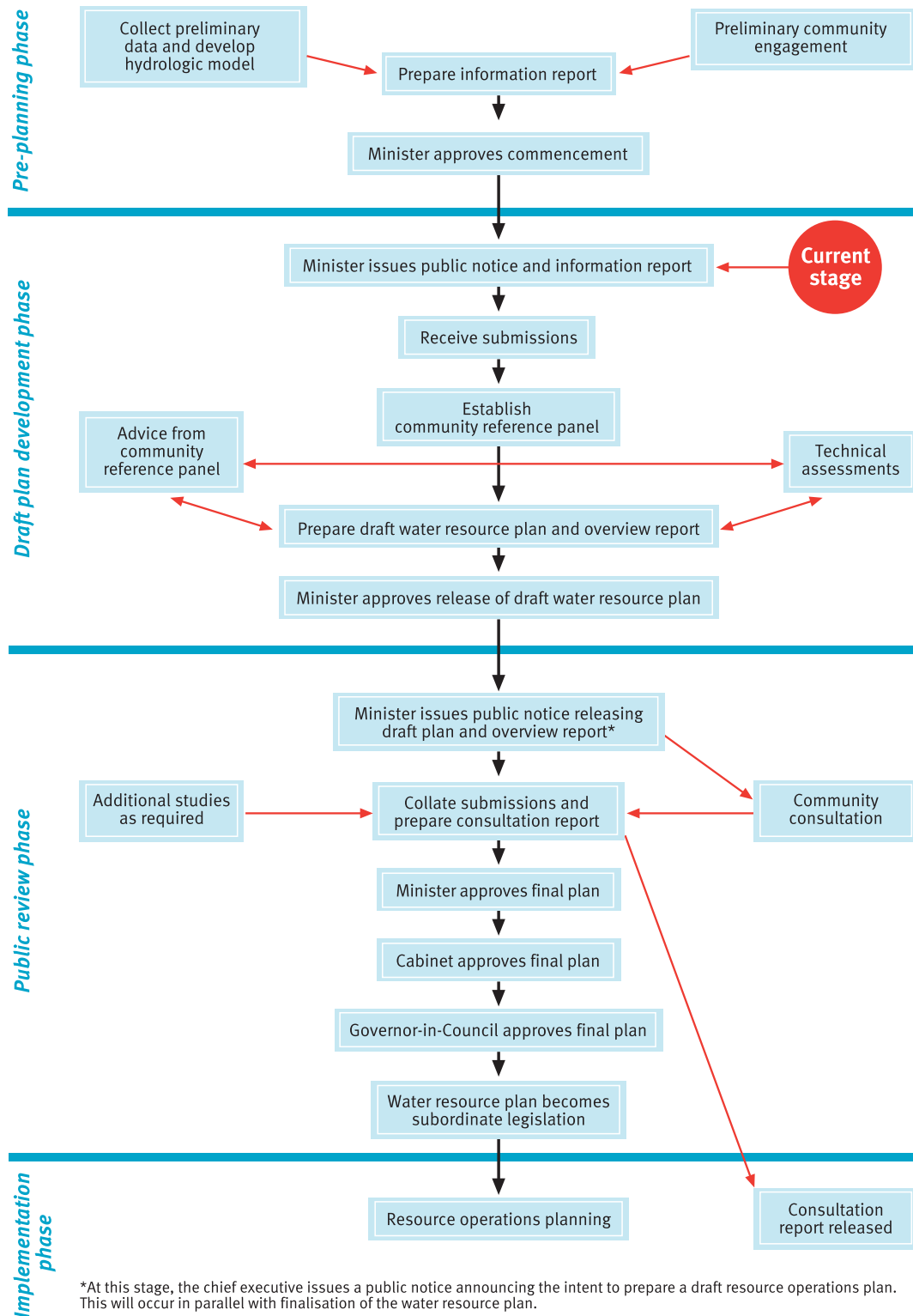


Figure 1: Stages of developing a WRP

*This process also applies to developing an amendment to an existing water resource plan.

2. Water resource planning

2.1 How the need arose

The Fitzroy Basin WRP covers the management of all surface water in the basin including overland flow. The management of the groundwater resources in the basin is the next priority to be progressively included in the WRP.

Prior to preparation of the original Fitzroy WRP in 1999 and a subsequent amendment in 2004, the use of groundwater in the Isaac–Connors was not considered to have reached a point where it would significantly impact on plan outcomes.

However, demand for groundwater in the Isaac–Connors catchment has increased significantly, driven mainly by mining and agriculture. A prolonged drought and record low water levels in some aquifers has raised concerns that the groundwater resource may be at risk of being overcommitted.

Unless groundwater resources in the Isaac–Connors system are integrated into the water planning framework, continued growth could significantly impact on the security of existing water users' entitlements and on ecological health.

Under provisions of the Act, WRPs at risk in these circumstances must be amended to regulate groundwater.

Amending the Fitzroy WRP to include the groundwater resources in the Isaac–Connors catchment will enable the integrated management of surface water and groundwater resources. This 'single resource' approach is important in the Isaac–Connors catchment where surface water and groundwater are strongly linked.

For these reasons the minister announced the intention to prepare a draft amendment to modify the existing WRP.

2.2 What the amended WRP will achieve

The amended WRP will provide a framework for sustainably allocating and managing groundwater resources of the Isaac–Connors catchment.

It will provide strategies for:

- sustainable allocation and management of groundwater
- improved specification for water entitlements
- specification of water for groundwater-dependent ecosystems
- where practicable, the creation of tradable water entitlements
- monitoring and reporting of water management and use in the catchment.

Together, these initiatives will promote improved security and certainty for water users while supporting stated ecological outcomes.

2.3 Area to which the draft amendment will apply

The area that is proposed for the draft amendment comprises the Isaac–Connors catchment within the Fitzroy Basin. This is shown in Figure 2 on page 8.

2.4 Water to which the draft amendment will apply

The current Fitzroy WRP applies to all surface water throughout the Fitzroy Basin. This comprises water in watercourses, lakes and springs and overland flow water. The draft amendment will apply to all subartesian water in the Isaac–Connors catchment area (Figure 2).

2.5 Initiating the process

The Act requires the minister to publish a Notice of Intention to prepare a draft amendment. Among other things, the notice must give the reasons for preparing a draft amendment, state the proposed area, and define the water to which the amendment will apply.

The notice of intention to prepare a draft amendment has been made, and submissions were invited. A copy of the notice is included as Appendix A.

2.6 Moratorium

The minister has announced a moratorium on subartesian water contained in the alluvial aquifers of the Isaac–Connors catchment. A copy of the moratorium notice is included as Appendix B.

The intent of the moratorium is to ensure the water entitlement status quo remains while the draft amendment is being developed.

The moratorium places a hold on licence applications to take subartesian water in the declared subartesian area and construction of works in the alluvial aquifers outside the declared section of the Isaac–Connors system. The moratorium area covers all of the Isaac River and Connors River catchment and is the same as the amendment area shown in Figure 2. The moratorium is expected to apply until the draft amendment has been finalised.