



QUEENSLAND  
FARMERS'  
FEDERATION

# Discussion paper: Seeking views on a Future National Water Agreement (March, 2024)

**Prepared by:**

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**Name:** Jo Sheppard, QFF CEO  
**E:** [qfarmers@qff.org.au](mailto:qfarmers@qff.org.au)

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The united voice of  
Queensland agriculture

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This submission is provided to:

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

GPO Box 3090

Canberra ACT 2601

Email: [nwi@dcceew.gov.au](mailto:nwi@dcceew.gov.au)

## Our members

- Canegrowers
- Cotton Australia
- Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers
- Nursery & Garden Industry Queensland
- eastAUSmilk
- Australian Cane Farmers Association
- Queensland United Egg Producers
- Turf Queensland
- Queensland Chicken Meat Council
- Pork Queensland
- Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group
- Burdekin River Irrigation Area
- Central Downs Irrigators Ltd
- Fairburn Irrigation Network
- Mallowa Irrigation
- Pioneer Valley Water Co-operative Ltd
- Theodore Water Pty Ltd
- Eton Irrigation
- Queensland Oyster Growers Association
- Lockyer Water Users Forum

# About the Queensland Farmers' Federation



## The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland.

We are a member-based organisation representing the interests of peak agriculture industry organisations (both state and national). Through our members, QFF represents more than 13,000 primary producers across the cotton, cane, horticulture, dairy, nursery and garden, poultry, pork, and intensive animal industries.

We unite the sector to engage in a broad range of economic, social, environmental, and regional issues through advocacy, policy development, and project activity. We work with the government of the day on behalf of industry, farmers, and the community to provide powerful representation and contribution to the policy direction, sustainability, and future growth of Queensland's agriculture sector.

Our Council of member representatives and policy committees set the strategic priorities for policy development and advocacy, while our Board ensures our corporate governance.

QFF draws on the expertise and industry knowledge of our members, and through our commitment to collaboration and considered policy development, we lead Queensland's agriculture sector towards a strong future, ensuring our members are ahead of the game and have a voice at the table on the issues that matter to their members.

## Submission

QFF welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Australian Government, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water; Discussion paper – Seeking views on a future national water agreement (March, 2024) (discussion paper).

We provide this submission without prejudice to any additional submission from our members or individual farmers.

## Executive Summary

QFF recognises the multiple emerging water management needs since the National Water Initiative (NWI) was created in 2004 and the importance of efficient, transparent, and sustainable water resource planning to achieve water security. QFF also recognises the significant influence that the NWI has had on regional communities and irrigator industries in establishing a water market.

In response to the discussion paper, QFF does not support a proposal for development of a new national water agreement. QFF endorses the recommendations of the Productivity Commission's National Water Reform Interim report 2024, particularly that: "a renewed NWI should improve and expand on the existing agreement while retaining its foundations."<sup>1</sup>

## Purpose of a renewed water agreement

The demand for water is growing and changing. QFF's peak body members are directly involved in the many demand pressures and changes and are impacted by water management policies that seek

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission 2024, National Water Reform 2024, Interim Report, Canberra, April.

to address water security. QFF strongly advocates that a revised or new national water agreement ensures that sufficient water allocation is maintained and prioritised to support current and future agricultural production demands and farm viability.

QFF further advocates that the current NWI framework provides the basis for water efficiency management programs and water supply and should be used to improve the existing agreement. Since its establishment, the NWI framework has supported significant advancements in sustainability and water usage within the agriculture industry and across water planning and water accounting. National water reforms have laid the groundwork for efficient and sustainable resource management, as evident in the development of water planning and entitlement frameworks.

The current proposal for a new national water agreement represents a considerable policy overhaul. QFF does not support complete policy overhaul on the basis that the NWI offers a structured framework and guiding principles for the sustainable management of Australia's water assets.

## Objectives

### 1. Securing water for all uses.

**Objective:** The safe and secure supply of sufficient water quality and quantity to sustain our natural environments, Culture, economic prosperity and communities.

This objective seeks to ensure that water is protected for the diverse needs of the nation, including agriculture, supporting community health, including water required for the move towards a low carbon future, and supporting economic productivity, whilst meeting growing demands for a finite resource.

**Recommendation:** Agriculture is essential to community health and prosperity. It is crucial for this objective to also recognise the water needs of irrigated crops and prioritise the protection of Australia's food security for a sustainable future. Failing to acknowledge the importance of secure water access for ensuring a food-secure nation risks undermining economic growth and communities.

### 2. Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' water interests and values.

**Objective:** A water management framework, underpinned by national and international human rights principles, which recognises and protects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Cultural, spiritual, social, environmental and economic water interests and values.

In acknowledgement of the human rights principles and the diverse range of cultural, spiritual, social, environmental, and economic water interests and values, it's notable that both the NWI and Queensland's legislation recognise the intersectionality of climate change and Indigenous water concerns. QFF supports the integration of cultural water considerations into the NWI. This involves sourcing water for economic purposes through market mechanisms while respecting and utilising cultural water in accordance with First Nations' community objectives.

Acknowledging Indigenous cultural values and objectives within current water reform initiatives aims to deepen understanding of cultural water. New policies involving Indigenous communities are subject to negotiation, reflecting Indigenous responsibilities regarding water-related commitments, which encompass cultural, spiritual, physical, and economic connections to water. QFF supports the transparency of a water management framework, urging governments to publicly report on water allocations for economic development and the resulting impacts on Traditional Owners. Additionally,



establishing a clear and measurable policy approach, particularly concerning the value of water for various users, is deemed essential.

While prioritising First Nation perspectives is vital, it's imperative that they do not overshadow the interests of other stakeholders. Clarifying enhanced Indigenous water involvement early on is welcomed. For instance, legally granted entitlements, native title claims and water extraction rights can create tensions during NWI renewal discussions. QFF emphasises that water for Indigenous interests is acquired through market mechanisms, existing reserves, or unallocated water, without compromising current entitlement holders.

**Recommendation:** Incorporating indigenous cultural values and objectives within the existing water framework aims to foster a deeper appreciation of cultural water. Any new policies affecting indigenous communities will be subject to negotiation before implementation. While it is crucial to prioritise First Nation perspectives, it is important to ensure the interests of all stakeholders.

### 3. Climate resilient water management.

**Objective:** Environmentally sustainable water planning and management that is interconnected, adaptive and responsive to climate change and other circumstances.

Extreme events have spurred numerous inquiries into flood control measures for dams. Additionally there's a concerted effort to upgrade dams to mitigate risks of infrastructure failure. Water Plans are being revised to incorporate updated hydrological records and long-term climate change trends, while also considering appropriate planning cycles for addressing longer-term climate change risks.

Environmentally sustainable water planning and management responses to climate change has many influences on irrigated agriculture in Queensland. QFF's irrigated agriculture members represent diverse irrigation schemes, some of which differ significantly from those in other regions across Australia. Consequently, one-size-fits-all policy or accounting is not applicable. It's crucial to recognise scheme diversity in future water management policies.

A revised national water agreement must integrate the climate change challenges and adaptability of agriculture and ensure that policies do not negatively affect the viability of Australia's food, fibre, and foliage production.

Improved alignment between state and federal governments water management is necessary, enabling greater transparency in future funding and facilitating smoother transitions for delivering new water infrastructure projects. These projects are vital for bolstering future water security and sustaining agricultural production, which is fundamental to ensuring food security.

**Recommendation:** When addressing challenges posed by climate change, it is critical to consider the future of Australia's agriculture sector for food, fibre, and foliage production.

### 4. Ensuring evidence-based decision making.

**Objective:** The robust and coordinated use of science, data and Cultural knowledge underpins evidence-based decision-making in water management.

Recognising regions more susceptible to increased droughts and floods allows for infrastructure funding to be targeted using evidence-based methods. This strategy helps alleviate the effects of climate change and better addresses the forthcoming water security challenges in the agricultural sector. QFF supports transitioning away from short-term, transactional assistance during drought

seasons to backing the government's move towards long-term disaster preparedness and resilience-building initiatives.

QFF recognises that for a revised or new national water agreement to effectively contribute to the future development of the agricultural sector, it's essential to employ scientific evidence as the basis for policymaking. Utilising science and objective data ensure an evidence-based approach to policy formulation, which considers the diverse needs and priorities of water users.

**Recommendation:** Water management requires a greater evidence-based approach. For a new national water agreement to effectively contribute to the future development of the agricultural sector, it's essential to employ scientific evidence as the basis for policymaking.

## 5. Transparent, strategic water infrastructure investment.

**Objective:** Investment in major water infrastructure that is effective, strategic and transparent.

Water infrastructure is critical to securing and delivering water supply however management of water infrastructure has not always been coordinated, efficient, or transparent. Unpreparedness for drought has been a hinderance in delivering strategic water investment that ensures communities have access to secure, available and reliable water. As such, investment in water infrastructure must be prioritised to ensure there are no critical shortages in times of drought. Long term strategic water infrastructure investment requires communication and collaboration between government departments, that can also deliver an effective water policy framework.

The water policy framework as part of a revised or new water agreement must improve the alignment between state and federal governments, increase transparency in future funding and facilitate smoother transitions for delivering new water infrastructure projects. These projects are vital for water security, sustained agricultural production, and food security.

**Recommendation:** Enhancing alignment between state and federal governments is paramount, as it fosters increased transparency in future funding and streamlines the implementation of new water infrastructure projects. However, the disconnect between state and federal governments is hampering investment in new water infrastructure, a problem that requires urgent attention and resolution.

## 6. Sustained community trust and confidence in government, water agencies, water managers and users.

**Objective:** Sustained community trust and confidence in government, water agencies, water managers and users.

Confidence in decision-making across the water management framework, involving various government agencies, is diminishing. Community confidence, although varying, must be upheld to ensure effective and efficient use of water to support improved water stewardship. Maintaining certainty and transparency in water management and allocation frameworks that benefit communities is essential for sustaining social acceptance of consumptive water uses.

Transparent monitoring and reporting in water management is integral to sustainable and effective water resource management. Additionally, enhancing water literacy among water users is crucial for facilitating better decision-making. Regular updates on obligations and accountability for water allocation holders, coupled with education through consultation processes led by water agencies and water managers, are necessary to uphold community trust and confidence in water governance.

Enhanced collaboration, communication, and transparent water governance are indispensable for managing water resources and preserving trust in an ever-changing environment.

QFF supports the establishment of enhanced governance structures that reflect national water policy leadership and fosters greater accountability within state governments in alignment with national water agreement principles. While the NWI serves as a basis for good governance in Queensland, inconsistencies in implementing NWI across the state exist. Addressing this disparity could streamline the process of water policy governance across various government departments.

A new or revised water agreement must provide a detailed outline of its evolution in a transparent manner, particularly regarding water users' obligations for reporting and compliance. Prioritising certainty for water rights holders is essential, along with offering a clear and transparent explanation of the risks associated with reductions in available water for consumptive use. Improved drought management and preparedness are crucial aspects of water management to maintain community trust, particularly during periods of drought, ensuring a secure water supply.

**Recommendation:** There is little clarity regarding a water agreement that reflects a more detailed approach for water managers and users. QFF recommends that a revised water agreement, must provide a detailed outline of its evolution in a transparent manner, particularly regarding water users' obligations for reporting and compliance in a rapidly changing environment.

## 7. The efficient use of water.

**Objective:** Water management frameworks that facilitate the efficient use of water.

Irrigation schemes are grappling with multiple water-related issues stemming from supply conditions. Challenges include insufficient groundwater recharge from existing assets, diminishing irrigation activity due to urban growth, supply arrangements that curtail medium priority access during prolonged poor to average seasons, and a restricted customer base for invested assets.

These limitations further impede the efficiency of water trading and create barriers to implementing water pricing reforms. Furthermore, there are environmental considerations that require investment for schemes to uphold environmental sustainability.

While the limitations and the demand for water is increasing in both urban and rural areas, there is a simultaneous need to increase productivity while ensuring water efficiency and sustainability. This is a complex relationship that governments must address in the NWI water policies.

To enhance water management frameworks that facilitate the efficient use of water, governments should integrate the following recommendations into policy frameworks:

1. **Invest in Infrastructure:** Governments should prioritise investment in irrigation infrastructure to enhance efficiency and resilience. Investments should focus on water storage, distribution systems, and drainage infrastructure to address challenges such as groundwater recharge, urban spread, and limited access during poor seasons.
2. **Promote Water Trading:** Efforts should be made to promote mechanisms that overcome barriers to efficient water trading. This can involve streamlining regulations, improving market transparency, and providing support for water trading initiatives.
3. **Environmental Sustainability Measures:** Governments should allocate funding for environmental sustainability initiatives within irrigation schemes. This includes measures to manage groundwater levels, mitigate salinity issues, and enhance drainage infrastructure.

4. **Integrated Water Management:** There is a need for integrated water management approaches that address both urban and rural water demands while ensuring sustainability. This involves coordinating water management across different sectors and levels of government to optimise water use and minimise conflicts.
5. **Enhanced Stakeholder Engagement:** Governments should prioritise stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes related to water management. This includes involving local communities, water users, and environmental organisations in policy development, planning, and implementation to ensure their perspectives and needs are considered.
6. **Research and Innovation:** Continued investment in research and innovation is crucial for evidence-based solutions to water management challenges. This includes supporting research initiatives focused on improving water efficiency, understanding climate change impacts, and developing innovative technologies for water management.

## Summary

### **1. Securing water for all uses.**

It's crucial to also recognise the water needs of irrigated crops and communities. Failing to acknowledge the importance of water security for food, foliage and fibre production risks undermining Australian production and economic growth and communities.

### **2. Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' water interests and values.**

Incorporating indigenous cultural values and objectives within the existing water framework aims to foster a deeper appreciation of cultural water. New policies will require negotiation and QFF's advocates that cultural water rights are balanced with the interests of all stakeholders.

### **3. Climate resilient water management.**

Recognising deficiencies in the policy framework to address climate change must acknowledge that policies should not negatively impact the future of food, fibre, and foliage production.

### **4. Ensuring evidence-based decision making.**

Water measurement requires a greater evidence-based approach. For a revised or new national water agreement to effectively contribute to the future development of the agricultural sector, it's essential to employ scientific evidence as the basis for policymaking.

### **5. Transparent, strategic water infrastructure investment.**

Alignment between state and federal governments is paramount, as it fosters increased transparency in future funding and streamlines the implementation of new water infrastructure projects. However, a disconnect between state and federal governments is hampering investment in new water infrastructure, a problem that requires urgent attention and resolution.

### **6. Sustained community trust and confidence in government, water agencies, water managers and users.**

There is little clarity in the new water agreement that reflects a more detailed approach for water managers and users. QFF recommends that a new or revised water agreement, must provide a detailed outline of its evolution in a transparent manner, particularly regarding water users' obligations for reporting and compliance in a rapidly changing environment.

### **7. The efficient use of water.**

Irrigation schemes are grappling with diverse water-related issues from inherent supply conditions. By implementing the provided recommendations, governments can address challenges in irrigation schemes and work toward sustainable water management for urban and rural communities.



## Conclusion

The NWI provides a foundation to address the complex and emerging challenges in water management. These challenges include supporting Indigenous water interests, ensuring climate-resilient water management, promoting evidence-based decision-making, transparent infrastructure investment, sustaining community trust, and enhancing the efficient use of water.

QFF supports the Productivity Commission's National Water Reform Interim report 2024 recommendation, that: "A renewed NWI should improve and expand on the existing agreement while retaining its foundations" and does not support developing a new national water agreement. QFF advocates that sufficient water allocation is maintained and prioritised for agricultural production to meet current and future agricultural demands and farm viability.

If you have any queries about this submission, please do not hesitate to contact Ms Sharon McIntosh at [sharon@qff.org.au](mailto:sharon@qff.org.au).

Yours sincerely

Jo Sheppard

Chief Executive Officer



**This submission is provided by the Queensland Farmers' Federation**

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PO Box 12009 George Street, Brisbane Qld 4003  
Level 8, 183 North Quay, Brisbane Qld 4000  
ABN 44 055 764 488

**Contact QFF**

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**E:** [qfarmers@qff.org.au](mailto:qfarmers@qff.org.au)  
**P:** 07 3837 4720  
**W:** [www.qff.org.au](http://www.qff.org.au)

