State of the catchments 2010

Wetlands

Central West region

State Plan target

By 2015 there is an improvement in the condition of important wetlands and the extent of those wetlands is maintained.

Background

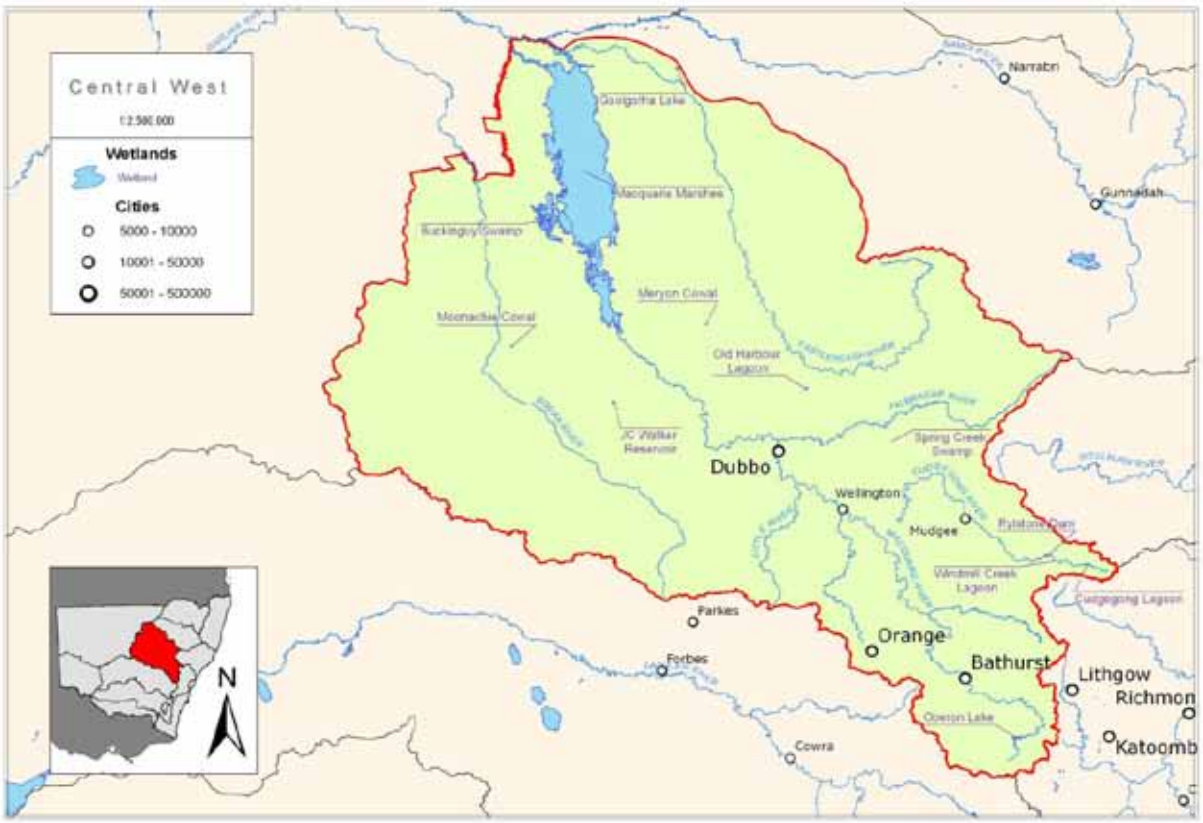
The Central West region covers approximately 92,000 km^2 of semi-arid central western New South Wales. The region contains a number of wetland types such as upland wetlands, semi-arid floodplains, inland billabongs and freshwater lakes.

Overall, wetlands in the Central West region are in very poor condition. The greatest pressure on wetlands in the region is from catchment and habitat disturbance caused by a high level of vegetation clearing, grazing, feral animals and impoundments.

A detailed technical report describes the methods used to derive the information contained in this report. At the time of publication of the *State of the catchments (SOC) 2010* reports, the technical reports were being prepared for public release. When complete, they will be available on the DECCW website: www.environment.nsw.gov.au/publications/reporting.htm.

Note: All data on natural resource condition, pressures and management activity included in this SOC report, as well as the technical report, was collected up to January 2009.

Map of the catchment



Assessment

Specific sites have been mapped for this report as NSW wetlands are neither comprehensively nor consistently mapped. The state target specifies that only 'important' wetlands be assessed; the sites reported on in this document are therefore internationally, nationally and regionally important but may not be representative of all wetlands in the region.

The state target reports only on freshwater wetlands in NSW and does not include riverine, estuarine or tidal wetlands.

Condition

Wetland 'extent' refers to the condition of the inundated area and the vegetation that depends on it. A state-wide methodology is currently being developed by DECCW to determine the minimum and maximum extent of each wetland. Until this method has been developed and consistent mapping is carried out for all regions, the extent of NSW wetlands cannot be compared or comprehensively reported on.

Indicators of condition

In general, there is a lack of available data on the condition of NSW wetlands and very few procedures or standards for collecting and analysing such data.

For the purposes of this report, 'indicators of condition' have been combined for each wetland (without weighting) to produce an overall 'condition rating' (see Table 1). This provides an overview

of the wetlands within the region and may prove useful when devising a formal methodology to assess wetlands in NSW. The value of this condition rating depends to a very large extent on the data on individual indicators; in many cases the 'indicator of condition' is based on very limited data, in some cases on pest species alone, so the overall indicator should be regarded with some caution.

Measured in the fringing zone and/or wetland, the indicators of condition assessed for the 12 most significant wetlands in the Central West region were:

- **biological condition** – the response of the wetland flora (eg aquatic and fringing vegetation) and fauna (eg birds, fish and invertebrates) to pressures on the ecosystem. It can be a measurement of the abundance or health of these plants and animals or a combination of both; there is currently not much data available for many of these indicators and additional data will need to be collected in future
- **pest species** – the ratio of native to introduced species of flora and fauna
- **water quality** – the condition of the water in the wetland. Water quality takes into account pH, salinity and turbidity; data can be very difficult to analyse as results can be highly variable. Analysis of a wetland's water quality is important as the water supports biota and ecological processes within the ecosystem
- **soil condition** – the physical attributes of the wetland including pH, salinity, soil moisture, erosion and modifications such as channelling works. Wetland soils contain nutrients that form the base of the food chain and store seeds and eggs of wetland flora and fauna. Soils vary according to wetland type.

Table 1 Indicators of condition and condition rating for wetlands in the Central West region

Wetlands	Condition	Trend	Data confidence	Indicators				Extent (hectares)	Trend
				Biological condition	Pest species	Water quality	Soil condition		
Overall Central West wetlands		?	L						
Overall NSW wetlands									
Macquarie Marshes Inland floodplain swamp		?	L					265810.31	?
Oberon Wetlands Upland freshwater lake								532.48	?

Old Harbour Lagoon Inland freshwater lake								199.55	?
Buckinguy Swamp Inland floodplain swamp								16309.66	?
Rylstone Dam Inland freshwater lake								95.68	?
Windmill Creek Lagoon Inland freshwater lake								1.23	?
Cudgegong Lagoon Inland freshwater lake								39.01	?
Goolgotha Lake Inland freshwater lake								178.57	?
Meryon Cowal Inland freshwater lake								49.56	?
JC Walker Reservoir Inland freshwater lake								68.71	?
Moonachie Cowal Inland swamp fed by rainfall/runoff								34.31	?
Spring Creek Swamp Inland billabong								3.98	?

Condition

- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- Very poor
- No data

Trend

↑	Improving
↔	No change
↓	Declining
?	Unknown

Data confidence

H	High
M	Medium
L	Low

Indicators of condition vary between wetland types; some indicators of condition do not apply to certain wetland types or may be scored differently between types. Various data is not available due to reasons such as a lack of raw data, lack of information on how to score certain indicators and no long-term datasets to appropriately score the indicator.

Condition indicators, such as invertebrates and vegetation, would be appropriate if data and standards were available. These will continue to be developed for future reporting cycles.

Condition variables

Many variables were taken into account when calculating condition scores. Where relevant, the following variables were considered during analysis of the Central West region wetlands:

- **biological condition** – tree health
- **pest species** – ratio of native to introduced plants, ratio of native to introduced animals
- **water quality** – total nitrogen load (kg/ha/yr), total phosphorus load (kg/ha/yr), total nitrogen (µg/L), total phosphorus (µg/L), number of algal blooms, turbidity (NTU), ambient pH, salinity (EC)
- **soil condition** – ambient pH.

For detailed information on which variables were used to calculate the condition scores and how they were scored, aggregated and weighted, please see the supporting technical report.

Pressures

There are a variety of 'pressures' or disturbances that adversely impact on wetlands and ultimately affect the overall condition rating. As was the case with condition assessment, a methodology has not yet been formulated to determine the pressures on individual wetlands across all NSW.

Indicators of pressure

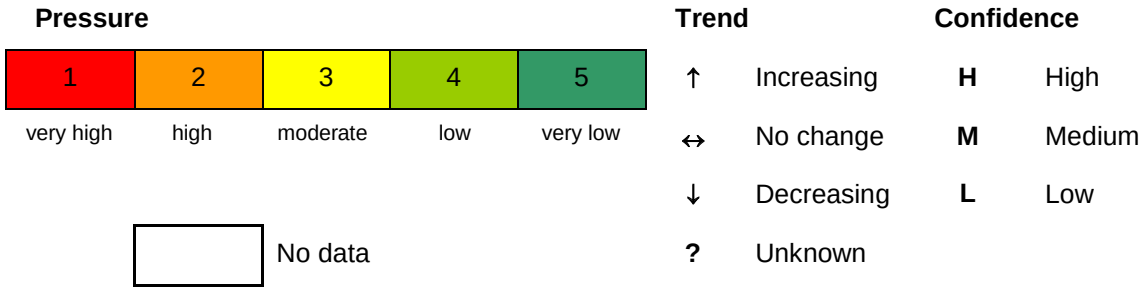
For the purposes of this report, the following 'indicators of pressure' have been combined (without weighting) to produce an overall 'pressure rating' (see Table 2).

Measured in the fringing zone, wetland and/or hydrological catchment, the indicators of pressure assessed for the 12 most significant wetlands were:

- **catchment disturbance** – modifications or changes to the catchment structure or processes that affect the wetland. Significant catchment disturbances affecting NSW wetlands include urbanisation, agriculture, vegetation clearing, infrastructure and fire
- **hydrological disturbance** – the levels of nutrients entering a wetland, water and soil chemistry, vegetation patterns, the biota present and the wetland's productivity. Drainage, damming, extraction and river regulation have greatly altered the hydrologic dynamics of many NSW wetlands
- **habitat disturbance** – both the direct removal of wetland habitat and activities that modify, damage or disturb wetland habitat areas. Disturbance to a habitat may include construction work, urban development, clearing for agriculture, recreational uses and water regulation.

Table 2 Indicators of pressure and overall pressure rating for wetlands in the Central West region

Wetlands	Pressure	Trend	Data confidence	Indicators		
				Catchment disturbance	Hydrological disturbance	Habitat disturbance
Overall Central West wetlands		?	L			
Overall NSW wetlands						
Macquarie Marshes Inland floodplain swamp		?	L			
Oberon Wetlands Upland freshwater lake		?	L			
Old Harbour Lagoon Inland freshwater lake		?	L			
Buckinguy Swamp Inland floodplain swamp		?	L			
Rylstone Dam Inland freshwater lake		?	L			
Windmill Creek Lagoon Inland freshwater lake		?	L			
Cudgegong Lagoon Inland freshwater lake		?	L			
Goolgotha Lake Inland freshwater lake		?	L			
Meryon Cowal Inland freshwater lake		?	L			
JC Walker Reservoir Inland freshwater lake		?	L			
Moonachie Cowa Inland swamp fed by rainfall/runoff		?	L			
Spring Creek Swamp Inland billabong		?	L			



As was the case with indicators of condition, some indicators of pressure do not apply to certain wetland types or may be scored differently between types. Likewise, various data is not available due to reasons such as a lack of raw data, lack of information on how to score certain indicators and no long-term datasets to appropriately score the indicator.

Pressure variables

Many variables were taken into account when calculating pressure scores. Where relevant, the following variables were considered during analysis of the 12 most significant wetlands in the Central West region:

- **catchment disturbance** – catchment cleared (%), wetland adjoining urban areas (%), infrastructure, presence of point sources
- **hydrological disturbance** – number and type of impoundments, river regulation, farm dam density, number of groundwater bores, density of irrigation channels
- **habitat disturbance** – recreational use (eg camping, boat ramps, parks), lakebed cropping, grazing, pugging, travelling stock routes, roads crossing and/or adjoining the wetland, wetland in a protected area (%), barriers without fish passage, presence of feral animals.

For detailed information on which variables have been considered when calculating the above pressure scores and how they are scored, aggregated and weighted, please see the supporting technical report.

Management activity

Addressing the wetlands target in the Central West region involves implementing a number of policies and programs at both a state and regional level, which will result in the improved condition of Central West and other NSW wetlands.

State level

The wetlands target is being addressed at the state level in numerous ways:

Policy

- The draft NSW Wetlands Policy provides clear and consistent principles of management for the improvement and protection of the state's wetlands. It also aims to increase the capacity for a coordinated, cross-government approach to wetland conservation.

Protection and rehabilitation

- The NSW Wetland Recovery Program (WRP), NSW Rivers Environmental Restoration Program (RERP) and NSW Riverbank Project aim to deliver long-term and permanent benefits for ecologically significant wetlands. These programs achieve such benefits through water efficiency projects, water buy-back and projects to improve wetland management. The WRP and RERP Programs are joint initiatives with the Australian Government
- There is continuous protection and conservation of wetlands under conservation agreements and on public reserves, in wildlife refuges and on various other private and public lands
- The 2008–2018 NSW National Park Establishment Plan lists wetlands as a priority
- The Environmental Flows Reference Group comprises government and community stakeholders. Its role is to propose government targets for the use of water in the Macquarie and Cudgegong rivers. The group is also a forum whereby members of the government can communicate the outcomes of many Central West catchment initiatives
- The NSW WRP is a suite of projects that aims to restore the health of the Macquarie Marshes. Specifically:
  - an adaptive Environmental Management Plan is being prepared that will identify ecological, social and cultural assets for protection in major Macquarie Marshes wetlands. It will also outline desired ecological outcomes and identify water needs
  - a compliance program is being produced with the aim of ending illegal diversion or extraction of environmental flows
  - the NSW Rivers Environmental Restoration Program, NSW RiverBank project and NSW WRP have purchased 21,900 ML of entitlements in the Macquarie Valley that will be used to enhance wetland and river health
  - an ecological character description will be prepared for the Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve component of the Ramsar site. This will assess the degree of change in ecological character from 1986 onwards.

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

The NSW Integrated Monitoring of Environmental Flows measures changes in environmental flows and ecosystem responses and provides information to improve wetland conditions.

Regional level

At the regional level, the Central West Catchment Management Authority (CMA) is undertaking various activities to achieve the state target. Specific examples include the following:

- the Central West CMA incentive funding program
- mapping, classifying and prioritising wetlands within the region
- use of a rapid assessment of wetlands protocol, developed by the DECCW wetlands team. This will be used to gather additional data on wetlands that have not been comprehensively analysed
- development of a Wetland Conservation Management Program comprising:
  - on-ground incentives to landholders for protecting wetland sites, fencing, alternative watering points, educational activity support, weed and feral animal management and erosion control works. Innovative projects that may comprise a water saving/efficiency component are also considered

- training courses that provide further information on the value of wetlands
- wetland management planning to help stakeholders develop a whole-of-farm plan to incorporate the values of the wetlands
- a database to consolidate new and existing knowledge of Central West wetlands
- demonstration sites encompassing wetlands that fulfil different functions eg drought refuge, wetland rarity
- acid sulfate soil assessments on wetlands
- monitoring activities with government and/or landholders across the catchment.

Various other regional groups contribute to better outcomes for the Central West wetlands:

- the Central West region landowner community who values, and wishes to conserve and protect, existing wetlands
- in regards to improving the condition of the Macquarie Marshes:
  - DECCW has appointed a Macquarie Marshes Conservation Officer and is offering on-ground incentives to landholders within the core area of the Macquarie Marshes
  - Industry & Investment NSW, Central West CMA and other groups are developing a Best Management Practice for Grazing within the Macquarie Marshes.

Further reading

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Published by: Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW, 59–61 Goulburn Street. PO Box A290, Sydney South 1232.
Ph: (02) 9995 5000 (switchboard). Ph: 131 555 (environment information and publications requests).
Ph: 1300 361 967 (national parks, climate change and energy efficiency information and publications requests).
Fax: (02) 9995 5999. TTY: (02) 9211 4723.
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