



## Submissions on the Draft Katherine Water Allocation Plan 2026-2036

The current Katherine Tindall Limestone Aquifer Water Allocation Plan 2024–2026 will expire on 16 February 2026.

The Northern Territory Government is developing a new 10-year water plan for Katherine (2026–2036), to be declared by the Minister for Water Resources in 2026. This will be the fifth iteration of the Katherine Water Plan.

A draft of the new plan has been prepared with input from the Daly River Water Advisory Committee. The committee page says it includes representatives from agriculture, tourism, recreational fisheries, Aboriginal communities, and commerce. See the committee members [here](#).

The Katherine Water Plan 2026-2036 will be in force for 10 years. However, the Daly River Water plan is currently under development for the broader Daly River Basin. It is anticipated that the future Daly River Water Plan would incorporate the Katherine Water Plan 2026-2036.

Submissions on the draft Katherine Water Plan are open until Monday 10 November. You can write your own submission and upload it to the haveyoursay website here:

<https://haveyoursay.nt.gov.au/draft-katherine-water-allocation-plan-2026-2036/surveys/have-your-say-on-draft-katherine-water-allocation-plan-2026-2036>

### Include in your submission document:

- Introduce yourself and your connection to the Katherine region
- Voice your concerns about water, and about the new Katherine water allocation plan
- Highlight anything in particular you think the water controlled should consider before making his decision.
- Sign off with your name and email address

**Documents:** You can find and download the relevant documents on the [haveyoursay website](#) on the right hand side of the page.

If you have any questions you can contact Correa at [Correa.Driscoll@ecnt.org](mailto:Correa.Driscoll@ecnt.org)



## Draft Katherine Water Allocation plan 2026-2036

### Summary of major changes

	2024-2026 Plan	2026-2036 Plan	Comment
Plan Area	5860 km <sup>2</sup>	1176km <sup>2</sup>	A reduction in size of almost 80%.
Estimated Sustainable Yield (ESY)	38,391 ML per year	39,000 ML per year	No material change in water available for extraction.
Recovery of unused water policy	90% use required to retain license	70% use required to retain licence.	

ECNT submits that the Minister should not declare the Katherine Water Allocation Plan because it unacceptably risks important environmental and cultural values, including significant aquatic ecosystems such as the Daly River.

### Main concerns

1. The modelled flows, accounting for water allocations under the plan, may be insufficient to maintain the ecological integrity and natural values of the Katherine River.
2. The enormous boundary reduction could open up the possibility of significant additional water extraction within the previous plan area, potentially further risking the Katherine River.

### Water use

- The new Katherine Water Plan sets an Estimated Sustainable Yield (which is the amount of water the Northern Territory Government (NTG) has determined can be allocated to support “beneficial uses” e.g. drinking water, agriculture, mining) of 39,000ML/year.
- The current licensed extraction amount in the Katherine WAP area is 32,260ML/year. However, when it comes to actual water take, this is reported as an average of 11,161 ML/year between 2018-2024.
- The NTG exempts water licencing for water extracted for stock and domestic use, and road construction and maintenance. Where water extraction does not require licencing, there is no requirement for water take to be measured or reported. This is a risk for water accounting, e.g. where taking water without a license is a significant portion of the water being taken, the impact of this would not be properly assessed.
- There is significant uncertainty regarding the *actual* amount of water being extracted from this system, as unlicensed bores make up 65% of total bores in the area.



## Water Trading

- The new Katherine Water Plan allows for the trading of water.
- License holders can apply to trade water in accordance with [The Trading Licenced Water Entitlements Policy](#).
- This means that within a water allocation plan area, licence holders may agree to give or sell unused water entitlements to other licence holders. The ability to trade water has the potential to increase the total volume of water actually extracted, even if it remains within the overall licensed limit.
- This poses a risk to the water system, given that actual extraction has not exceeded 15,000 ML in any year since at least 2018. If extraction were to actually reach 39,000 ML, it could be more than double the highest level of extraction the system has previously experienced.

## Modelled flows in the Katherine River

- The Draft Water Allocation Plan Background Report highlights the natural values of the Katherine area including groundwater dependent ecosystems, and iconic species such as the Barramundi, Sooty Grunter and the Pig-Nosed Turtle. However, scientific modelling shows that under the water plan, Sooty Grunter, Barramundi and Pig-nosed Turtle could be at risk.
- Research by King et al. (2021) as part of the NESP Northern Australia Environmental Resources Hub<sup>1</sup> shows the minimum flow requirements to safely sustain healthy fish populations, particularly the Sooty Grunter (or black bream), must be higher than what is likely to occur under the new Katherine water allocation plan 2026-2036.
- At the Wilden gauging station in the Katherine River, research showed that major declines in suitable habitat occur with decreasing flow conditions for fish species including the sooty grunter (*H. fuliginosus*), catfish (*Neoarius spp.*), sharpnose grunter (*S. butleri*), and flyspecked hardyhead (*C. stercusmuscarum*). **The report recommended ensuring a flow of higher than 2.0 cumecs at Wilden gauge the Katherine River to protect critical habitat for these species<sup>1</sup>.**
- The NESP report<sup>1</sup> also found that reduced dry season flows could negatively impact Pig-nosed Turtles and Barramundi by restricting their movement. The research found that Barramundi freshwater migrations are reliant on waterway connections, which are impacted by reduced dry season flows. The research also found that pig-nosed turtles are impacted by reduced dry season flows by restricting their movement between nesting, feeding and basking areas.

---

<sup>1</sup> King, Alison & Dostine, Peter & Crook, David & Keller, Krystle & Schult, Julia & Waugh, Peter & Townsend, Simon & Tyler, Kyle & Wedd, Dion & Roberts, Brien & Wagiman, Tjuwaliyn. (2021). Environmental water needs of the Daly River, Northern Territory - Final report.



- The draft Katherine Water plan background information document acknowledges the research by King et al. <sup>1</sup> and concedes that additional research is required to better define the environmental water requirements of key aquatic species to inform their protection.
- The draft Katherine Water Plan sets the announced allocation trigger at 1.8 cumecs at Wilden gauging station. Under the plan, announced allocations is a process where licenced water entitlements are adjusted to minimise impacts to flows in the Katherine River.
- Not only is 1.8 cumecs already well below the minimum flow required for multiple fish species, the plan does not *enforce* any action once flows reach that trigger. The plan states if natural flows are predicted to be less than 1.8 cumecs, announced allocations *MAY* be implemented based on a number of considerations, and with the final decision with the Controller of Water Resources. ECNT believes this level of discretion is unacceptable.
- The 1.8 cumec trigger amount is based on natural flows, which is the flow in the river without any water extraction. Table 7 (Figure 1) from the previous Katherine WAP 2024-2026 shows that when extraction is taken into account, the resultant flow in more than half of the river flow scenarios including average flows, is below 2 cumecs at Wilden gauge, **which is less than the reported water requirements for fish species in the river.**

Table 7. Flow information (based on modelled natural flows at Wilden) to be used in annual announced allocation determinations.

River flow scenario	Proportion of modelled natural flow to be reserved for non-consumptive requirements	Modelled natural 1 November flow (unimpacted flow)		Resultant flow to preserved for non-consumptive use (impacted flow)		Allowable impact of consumptive use (total level of extraction)	
		cumecs	ML/day	cumecs	ML/day	cumecs	ML/day
Very dry	87%	1.73 - 1.80	149 - 156	1.51 - 1.57	130 - 135	0.22 - 0.23	19 - 20
Dry	80%	1.81 - 2.10	156 - 181	1.45 - 1.68	125 - 145	0.36 - 0.42	31 - 36
Average	70%	2.11 - 2.90	182 - 251	1.48 - 2.03	128 - 175	0.63 - 0.87	55 - 75
Wet	70%	2.91 - 3.60	251 - 311	2.04 - 2.52	176 - 218	0.87 - 1.08	75 - 93

Figure 1. Table 7 from the 2024-2026 Katherine WAP

- Note: There is minimal difference in extraction between the last plan (2024-2026) and the current draft plan for 2026-2036, meaning this conclusion still stands under the proposed Katherine Water plan 2026-2036.
- Table 7 also shows that the Katherine Water Plan is approved to take up to 30% of the modelled natural flow. This is not in line with the NTG’s own [Water Allocation Planning Framework](#) for the Top End Zone, which determines that at least 80% of flow at any time in any part of a river is allocated as water for the environmental and other public benefit water provision, and extraction for consumptive uses will not exceed the threshold level equivalent to 20% of flow at any time in any part of the river.



## Boundary changes

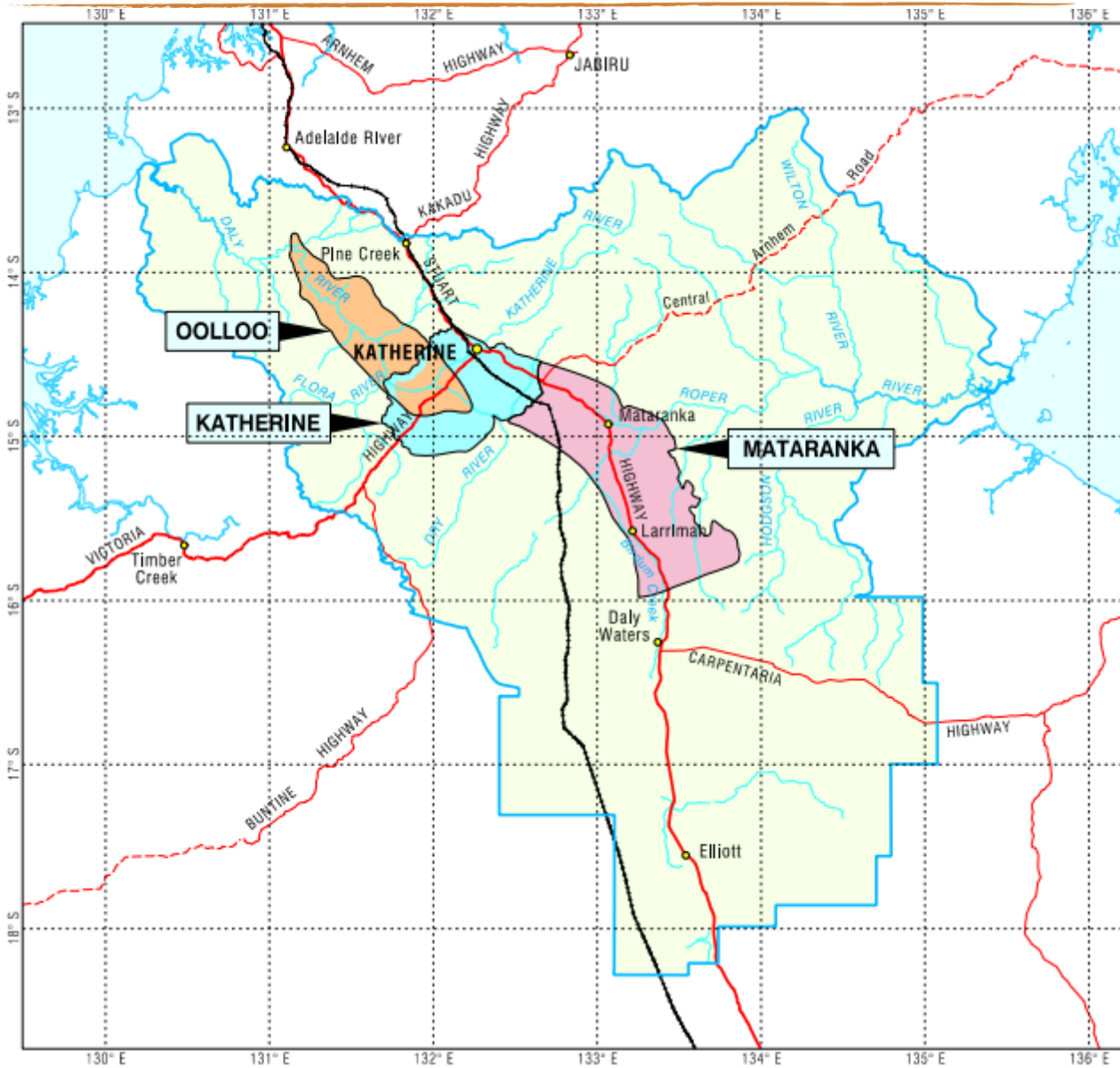
- There is an enormous reduction in the size of the Katherine Water Allocation Plan area between the 2024-2026 plan and the draft proposal for the 2026-2036 plan. The area of the current Water Allocation plan is 5,860 km<sup>2</sup>, whilst the proposed new plan covers an area of just 1,176 km<sup>2</sup> (See *Figure 2 and Figure 3*). This represents an 80% reduction in area between the two plans, yet the Estimated Sustainable Yield remains essentially the same, at 39,000ML/year.
- The Katherine WAP FAQ document released by the Northern Territory Government addresses this boundary change but describes the 80% reduction in area as only a “slight reduction.” It also notes that 96% of bores previously within the plan boundary remain inside the reduced boundary in the draft Katherine Water Plan 2026-2036.
- It appears that over 5000ML/year of water extraction currently allocated under the Katherine Water Allocation Plan will no longer be included under the new plan, as the licenses are located outside of the updated boundary area.
- ECNT has concerns that the 80% reduction in the plan area may open up the possibility of significant additional extraction within the previous plan area.
- ECNT is concerned that **the decision to reduce the plan area fails to account for any bores that may be established in the next 10 years in areas that have now been excluded**. Large areas of land including on Scott Creek station (NT Portion 3981) and Manbulloo Station (NT portion 1604) will no longer be covered by the Katherine Water Allocation Plan. These properties may require water extraction licences in the near future, as agricultural development in the region is rapidly expanding.
- Water from large parts of these properties could be extracted from the Tindall Limestone Aquifer, yet would not be considered as contributing to the Estimated Sustainable Yield under the Katherine Water Plan.
- The background report states NTG have refined the plan area to better align with hydrogeology and groundwater extraction patterns, focusing on the Tindall Limestone Aquifer (TLA). NTG states the TLA is a distinct hydrogeological unit, separate from the Jinduckin Formation and NTG argues the two should not be conflated into a single plan. However, science has shown that the Jinduckin formation does have a level of connectivity, and contributes baseflow water to the Katherine River <sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Tickell, S. (2018). Hydrogeology of the Jinduckin Formation, Florina Rd, Katherine. Department of Environment and Natural Resources. Darwin, Northern Territory: Northern Territory Government



- 
- There are significant knowledge gaps concerning local groundwater connectivity, flow paths and the time lags between groundwater extraction and impacts on the Katherine River, as cited in the plan. Without this information, the decision to not include significant parts of the aquifer under the Katherine Water Allocation Plan could potentially risk the environment and those who depend upon it.



### LOCATION MAP



**DALY ROPER BEETALOO WATER CONTROL DISTRICT**

For further information contact  
 Department of  
 Environment, Parks and Water Security  
 Water Resources Division

P: 08 8999 4455

E: [water.licensing@nt.gov.au](mailto:water.licensing@nt.gov.au)

Web: [nt.gov.au/water](http://nt.gov.au/water)

Goyder Centre, Chung Wah Terrace  
 Palmerston, Northern Territory



### DALY ROPER BEETALOO WATER CONTROL DISTRICT KATHERINE TINDALL LIMESTONE AQUIFER WATER ALLOCATION PLAN

#### Water Management Boundary

- Oolloo Dolostone Aquifer Water Allocation Plan
- Katherine Tindall Limestone Aquifer Water Allocation Plan
- Mataranka Tiedali Limestone Aquifer Water Allocation Plan
- Daly Roper Beetaloo Water Control District

#### General Features

- Major Town
- Minor Town
- Highway
- Main/Minor Road
- Unsealed Road
- Railway
- Watercourse
- Coastline
- Sea

Figure 2. Current Katherine Water Allocation Plan 2024-2026 area and the Daly Roper Beetaloo Water Control District

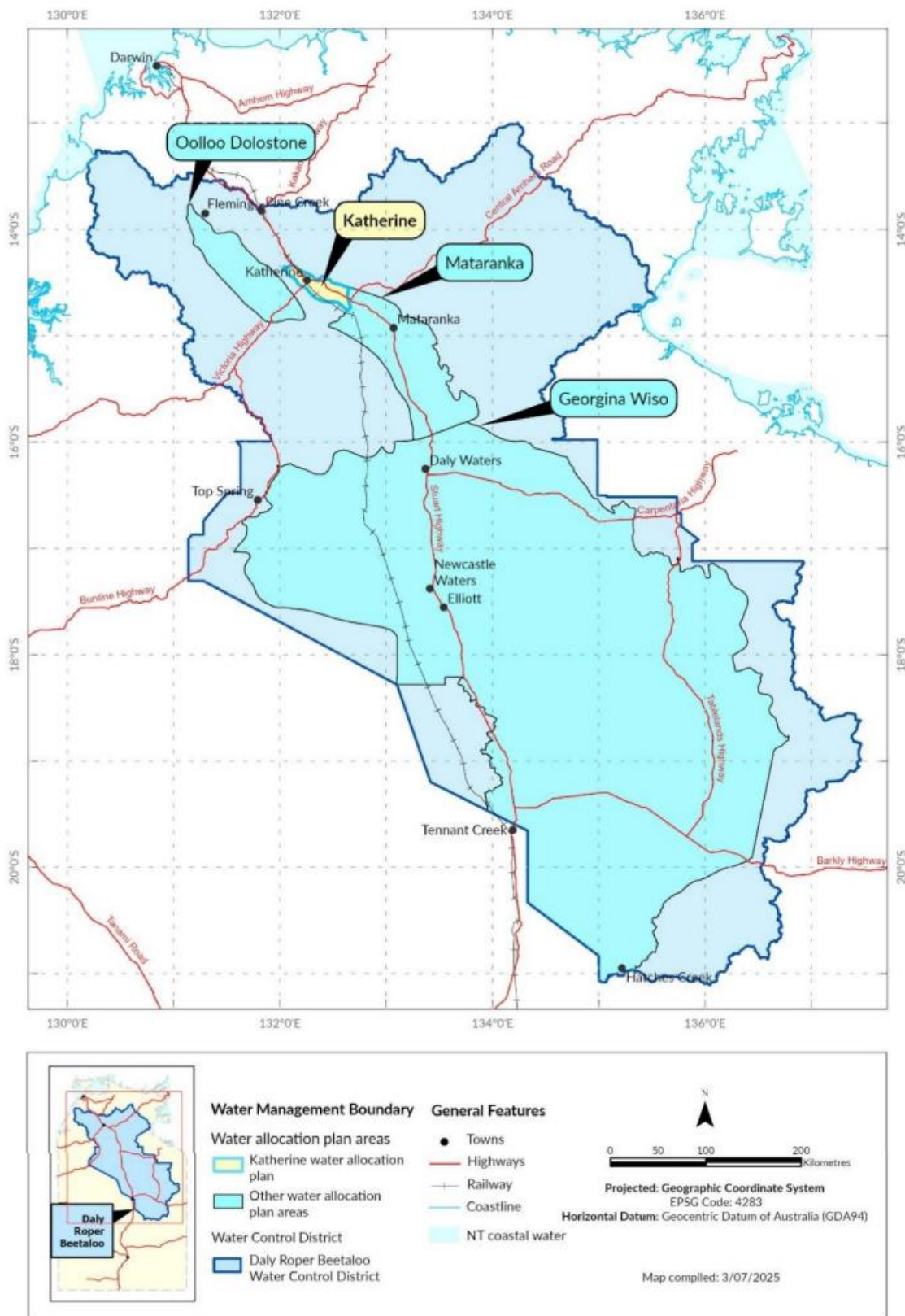


Figure 3. Proposed Reduced Katherine Plan area - Daly Roper Beetaloo Water Control District and Katherine Plan Area 2026-2036