

Community update on response to fish deaths in the Lower Darling

As residents of the Wentworth Shire Council, you may be aware of the mass fish death event that has been occurring further up-river around Menindee. As the river travels south, it brings some of the low-quality water with it and you may have observed some fish deaths.

Why did a mass fish death happen?

The fish deaths are caused by hypoxic blackwater, a naturally occurring phenomenon which causes extremely low dissolved oxygen levels. The scale of this event has been exacerbated by recent hot weather and significantly increased numbers of fish, having had two years of ideal breeding conditions, in the system as floodwaters recede.

What effect will the fish kill have on the water in Wentworth?

NSW Government and Commonwealth agencies are continuing to respond to a hypoxic blackwater event in the Lower Darling-Baaka River which caused a mass fish kill near Menindee last month.

At this time, while low dissolved oxygen water has moved down the river, the fish deaths remain minimal.

Releases of oxygenated water are continuing from Lake Menindee to boost dissolved oxygen levels and provide refuge for native fish.

With our responsibility to balance these releases against the need to maximise water in the Lakes for storage, flows are being gradually reduced and adjusted.

Monitoring is ongoing to minimise the risk of water quality deteriorating in different parts of the river.

Our latest water quality results indicate dissolved oxygen levels have recovered slightly, but there is still a risk of fish kills in Wentworth as low dissolved oxygen water moves downstream.

Is the drinking water safe?

Yes. Wentworth Shire Council is ensuring the drinking water continues to meet the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines through effective management of the local water treatment plant.

The water quality has not been impacted by this event and is therefore safe for customers to drink.

Some of the community use treated bore water for drinking. This is also not impacted by this event.

Are there health guidelines to provide advice for people using water from rivers?

Yes. NSW Health advise that surface water from farm dams, rivers and creeks should not be used for drinking or cooking without appropriate treatment. This applies to any location in NSW.

Surface water may be acceptable for non-potable uses such as washing clothes, irrigation, gardening, toilet-flushing, but we recommend that water used for bathing is at least disinfected before use.

NSW Health warns that heavy rainfall and flooding increases the risk of contaminated water which could contain disease causing micro-organisms, chemicals or algal blooms, entering surface waters such as rivers and creeks. Blue-green algae may cause skin irritation. Water quality may be affected during drought as flow and the amount of water is reduced.

Further information can be found on the NSW Health [website](#).

Can I go swimming or undertake water sports in the river?

At the present time there is an 'Amber blue-green algae alert' for the Darling River at Tapio. There are currently no alerts further downstream on the Darling River.

In the River Murray, there is an 'amber alert' at Curlwaa, up stream of Wentworth.

At amber alert levels blue-green algae may be multiplying in numbers. The water may have a green tinge and musty or organic odour. The water should be considered as unsuitable for potable use and alternative supplies or prior treatment of raw water for domestic purposes should be considered. The water may also be unsuitable for stock watering.

The water remains suitable for recreational use, however algal concentrations can change rapidly. Water users should use caution and avoid water where signs of blue-green algae is present.

Further information can be found on the WaterNSW [website](#).

How do I manage my livestock if blue-green algae blooms are present?

We know graziers are well versed in managing water for their stock. Local Land Service provides water testing kits to support them in tracking the quality of the water for their stock.

Early identification of blue-green algae blooms in livestock water sources is important. Prompt removal of livestock from the water source and access to an alternative safe water supply for stock is important if water if algae levels are too high.

There have been no reports of issues in relation to livestock access to water. However, if livestock owners have concerns, they can request a water sampling kits from Local Land Services.

Water NSW provides up to date information on [algae alerts](#).

Is the Wentworth Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) still operating?

No. The coordinated emergency response on the lower Darling-Baaka River has concluded following recent results of ongoing monitoring and assessments of water quality and conditions.

Throughout this week, experts reported promising improvements from water testing results, including dissolved oxygen levels, which informed the decision to stand-down the Wentworth EOC on Wednesday 5 April 2023.

Responsible agencies are continuing to meet regularly and operate throughout the Murray-Darling Basin and beyond.

In the unlikely event that conditions deteriorate, there is a capacity to immediately stand-up an EOC and initiate an emergency response.

What water quality monitoring is being undertaken?

Various agencies are monitoring dissolved oxygen and water temperature, with both remote monitors and field samples, with occasional field data on pH and electrical conductivity levels.

Water quality monitoring will continue across the Easter weekend.

Will there be further fish deaths?

Possibly. To support native fish outcomes, targeted releases are being made from Menindee Lakes to enhance downstream water quality. As the weather cools, we would anticipate the risk of hypoxic blackwater events to decrease.

Water quality within the Lower Darling-Baaka continues to show steady improvement over the last week.

While there have been reports of isolated small fish death events associated with low oxygen water making its ways through the system, the water quality within the Wentworth weir pool itself has remained well above these thresholds.

Are fish dying in the Wentworth weir pool or floating down from upstream?

There have been reports of isolated small fish death events associated with low oxygen water making its ways through the system. Dissolved oxygen at Pooncarie and further downstream has remained at critical levels for native fish, however; the water quality within the Wentworth weir pool itself has remained well above these thresholds.

Where else can I find information?

Information about the monitoring, management and maintenance of water quality, including detailed community updates from the Department of Planning and Environment, is available online: www.industry.nsw.gov.au/water/allocations-availability/droughts-floods/drought-update/managing-drought-recovery/blackwater

Observations of changes to water, including struggling fish or deaths can be reported directly to DPI Fisheries on 1800 043 536.

For more information about fish kills, as well as recent reports of observations and causes, visit: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/habitat/threats/fish-kills

These types of events can be distressing to members of the community, and anyone who requires health, welfare or other support can contact local community support services. A comprehensive list of services can be located online: www.service.nsw.gov.au/transaction/customer-support-service-infoxchange-service-seeker