Water use

In a state with highly variable rainfall, equitable access to water depends on capturing it, storing it, and using it efficiently. Climate change and population growth are making this more difficult.

Access to clean, safe and reliable water is fundamental to the health and wellbeing of all people, communities, cultures, animals and plants. Effective management and monitoring of water resources is essential to balancing human demands and maintaining a healthy environment.

The NSW government is beginning to address systemic issues to improve recognition of Aboriginal rights and access to water by strengthening the role of Aboriginal people in planning, governance and decision-making.

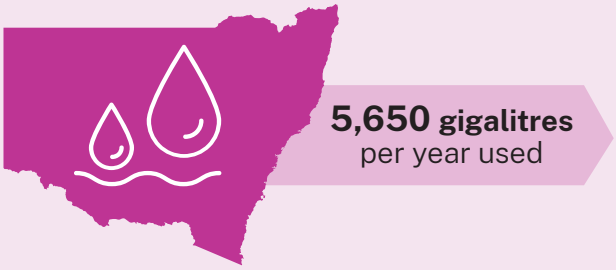
At a glance

How NSW is tracking

- Total water use in the State increased from about 3,322 gigalitres in 2019–20 to just over 5,820 gigalitres in 2021–22. This has been attributed to increased water availability and eased restrictions following good rainfall.
- Just over 4,000 gigalitres of environmental water were delivered to rivers and wetland habitats across NSW between 2021–22 and 2023–24. This is the most water in any three year period in the last decade. In 2023–24 alone 1,781 gigalitres were delivered.
- Annual per property residential water consumption has decreased since 2005–06. This indicates households have adopted measures to reduce their water use. The reduction per household was partially offset by our increasing population.
- All but one utility provided 100% of their population with water that met the guidelines for chemicals and contamination with *E. coli* (Inverell achieved 99.9%).

Total annual use

NSW uses an average of about **5,650 gigalitres** of water per year.



Household usage

Households use about **11%** of all the water used.

The big picture

Climate model projections indicate more severe droughts and floods, both of which harm water quality and availability. Smart water management will be critical for community resilience.

Water use

NSW status and trend indicators

These indicators relate to delivery of safe water for the environment, industry and households.

Indicator	Environmental status	Environmental trend	Information reliability
Proportion of water extraction covered by water sharing plans	GOOD	Stable	Good
Allocation of water for the environment	GOOD	Getting better	Reasonable
Proportion of the metropolitan and regional water supply meeting national guidelines	GOOD	Stable	Good
Minimising total and per person water use in metropolitan and regional centres	MODERATE	Getting better	Good
Water recycling – major utilities	MODERATE	Stable	Good
Water recycling – local water utilities	MODERATE	Getting better	Good

Indicator table scales

- **Environmental status:** Good, moderate, poor, unknown
- **Environmental trend:** Getting worse, stable, getting better, unknown
- **Information reliability:** ■■■ Good ■■■ Reasonable ■■■ Limited

Indicator definitions

Proportion of water extraction covered by water sharing plans – measures progress to actively managing all water sources.

Allocation of water for the environment – measures the amount of water allocated through water sharing rules and water licences to sustain and improve the health of rivers, wetlands and floodplains.

Proportion of the metropolitan and regional water supply meeting national guidelines – measures drinking water against the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines.

Minimising total and per person water use in metropolitan and regional centres – measures the amount of residential water use by property.

Water recycling (both major utilities and local water utilities) – measures the amount of water for non-potable (not drinkable) uses.