



**Natural Resources  
Access Regulator**

# **Compliance audit close out report for Operation Drawdown**

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Lower Murrumbidgee, Lower Lachlan, Macquarie and Lower Namoi

August 2021

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# Contents

About the Natural Resources Access Regulator .....	4
Monitoring water usage in NSW .....	4
High-level findings .....	4
Why we undertook this campaign .....	4
Scope of work.....	5
What we found.....	5
Action we took .....	5
Outcomes .....	5
Recommendations and next steps.....	5

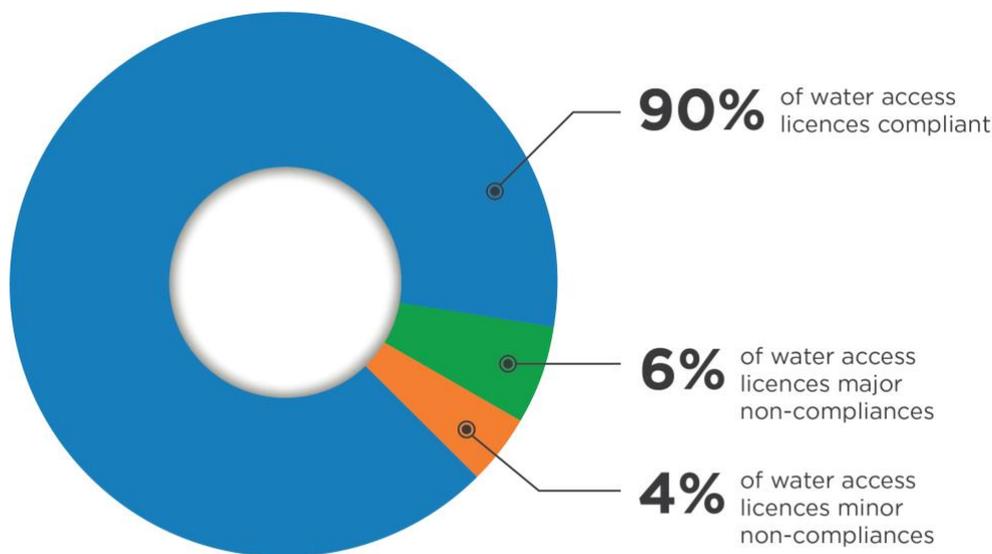
## About the Natural Resources Access Regulator

The Natural Resources Access Regulator (NRAR) is an independent government body established under the *Natural Resources Access Regulator Act 2017* (NSW) (NRAR Act). NRAR delivers effective, transparent and accountable enforcement of NSW's natural resources management legislation, helping water users comply with legislation to ensure fair and lawful access to water across the state.

## Monitoring water usage in NSW

NRAR's investigators and compliance officers travel throughout NSW, visiting areas covered by the state's 57 water sharing plans. They inspect properties and assess landholders' compliance with their water access licence, water supply works approval and the provisions of the *Water Management Act 2000* (NSW). Proactive monitoring of water usage allows NRAR to detect instances of non-compliance, track compliance trends and respond appropriately to non-compliance to avoid or mitigate harm.

## High-level findings



## Why we undertook this campaign

NRAR launched Operation Drawdown to assess compliance with bore extraction limits detailed within water supply work approvals.

The campaign ran from June 2020 and September 2020 and aimed to:

- assess the water take from works recorded in WaterNSW's Water Accounting System against the approved bore extraction limits for specific works, to identify potential breaches of those limits
- assess licence holders who may have breached the conditions in their approvals, to evaluate their compliance with all conditions in their licences and approvals
- engage with stakeholders to build relationships and increase their understanding of NRAR's role in water management.

## Scope of work

We conducted a desktop audit on water supply work approvals, focusing on the bore extraction limit for specific works. The audit related to the Lower Murrumbidgee, Lower Lachlan, Macquarie and Lower Namoi water sharing plans.

We also conducted compliance audits of licence holders who had potentially breached the bore extraction limit. This assessed compliance with all the conditions included in the licences and approvals.

## What we found

NRAR conducted hundreds of desktop audits and made dozens of site inspections which revealed that 90 per cent of water access licences inspected were fully compliant. NRAR has sent the owners of these licences a letter of thanks.

Just over 4 per cent of licences had minor compliance issues and owners were sent advisory or warning letters. The remaining 6 per cent of licences were found to have major breaches and their owners were issued with penalty notices or will be the subject of further investigations and possible prosecutions.

A water access licence allows licence holders to take water from a water source in accordance with the licence conditions. A water user may have more than one water access licence.

## Action we took

Following completion of the campaign, NRAR took a variety of regulatory actions. These included sending licence holders advisory or warning letters, issuing penalty notices to licence holders and referring cases to the Water Enforcement Taskforce for prosecution.

We referred 10 of the licence holders who had potentially breached their conditions to NRAR's Investigation and Enforcement team for further regulatory action.

## Outcomes

NRAR plays an important role in educating landholders and irrigators about their obligations and responsibilities as a holder of a water access licence and/or water supply work approval.

In addition to recognising licence holders' voluntary compliance, Operation Drawdown helped raise awareness of NRAR's role in managing water use in NSW. The campaign also demonstrated that NRAR's officers do not have to physically inspect properties to establish compliance.

The flow of cases from NRAR's Compliance Monitoring and Audit (West) team to the Water Enforcement Taskforce demonstrates the important role proactive campaigns play in identifying serious breaches and helping progress to prosecution.

## Recommendations and next steps

Based on the outcomes of this campaign, NRAR recommended that bore extraction limits in at-risk groundwater sources be included as a regulatory priority for 2021–22.