



MEETING MINUTES

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| Committee name | Stakeholder Advisory Forum |
| Date and time | Tuesday 31 March 2026, 9.30am-12noon |
| Location | Belmont Wastewater Treatment Plant and Belmont Desalination Plant construction site |

MEMBERS PRESENT

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| Cr Brian Adamthwaite | Lake Macquarie City Council (Chair) |
| Ms Sue Johns | National Seniors Association |
| Cr Deahna Richardson | City of Newcastle |
| Mayor Dan Watton | Cessnock City Council |
| Cr Warrick Penfold | Maitland City Council |
| Cr Michael Dowling | Dungog Shire Council |
| Cr Peter Francis | Port Stephens Council |
| Dr Craig Evans | The University of Newcastle |
| Mr Douglas McCloskey | Public Interest Advocacy Centre |
| Mr Bob Doyle | |
| Ms Rosa Krilic | Energy and Water Ombudsman of NSW (EWON) |
| Mr Ivan Waterfield | HunterNet |
| Ms Elizabeth York | Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA) NSW |
| Ms Nicole Grgas | Hunter Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service |
| Ms Amy De Lore | Business Hunter |
| Mr Cameron Archer | Paterson Historical Society |
| Mr Lindsay Hardy | Wollotuka Institute at the University of Newcastle |

APOLOGIES

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| Mr Boris Novak (represented by Ivan Waterfield) | HunterNet |
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IN ATTENDANCE

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| Ms Jennifer Hayes | Managing Director |
| Ms Emma Berry | Executive Manager Strategy and Engagement |
| Ms Renee Fedder | Group Manager Communication and Engagement |
| Ms Laura Boland | Stakeholder and Government Relations Advisor (SAF Secretary) |
| Mr Duncan Rayward | Project Lead Desalination Plant Project |
| Mr Tommy Zhang | Senior Project Manager Belmont Desalination Plant |

TOUR OF WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT

Members were given a tour of the Belmont Wastewater Treatment Plant, led by Deanne Pope – Treatment Engineer, Scott Collis and Chloe Martin. The tour followed previous SAIF members' interest in discussing anaerobic versus aerobic digestion in wastewater treatment.

The visit provided an overview of the treatment processes and end products, including biosolids. Members had the opportunity to ask questions about the process throughout the tour.

WELCOME

The Chair opened the formal part of the meeting at 10:30 am at the Belmont Desalination Plant site and provided an Acknowledgment of Country.

Apologies, as per the above table, were received and noted.

New members introduced themselves and their interest in being part of the SAF.

OVERVIEW OF AGENDA AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest were declared

HUNTER WATER OPERATIONAL UPDATE

- **Jennifer Hayes – Managing Director**

The SAF welcomed Ms Jennifer Hayes as Hunter Water's new Managing Director. Ms Hayes was appointed by the Minister for Water, commencing in the role in March 2026. Ms Hayes was previously Hunter Water's Acting Chief Executive Officer, and Executive Manager Finance and Business Performance (CFO). Ms Jennifer Hayes provided the Managing Director's operational update at the meeting:

Fuel security

Ms Hayes' operational update included discussion of supply chain issues relating to current fuel and product shortages, including shortages of poly pipe. She noted that Hunter Water currently has a three-month supply of pipe. Ms Hayes also noted that Hunter Water has been deemed a 'critical user', which under the Government's National Fuel Security Plan provides access to fuel supplies to support Hunter Water's critical operations.

Drought preparedness

Ms Hayes updated the SAF on drought preparedness. At the time of the meeting, water storages were at 66 per cent following a long, hot and dry summer with high evaporation and lower than average rainfall. As a result, Hunter Water has activated its drought preparedness arrangements, which commence at 70 per cent storage levels. Hunter Water is closely monitoring water levels and increasing community water conservation messaging to help reduce water demand across the region, encouraging households and businesses to make smart water choices.

Encouraging smart water choices has been a focus over the summer months, with a water conservation campaign led by Hunter Water. The *Every Day is a Good Day to Save Water* campaign featured a mix of television, radio, print and social media, with high engagement across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

Love Water Grants 2026

Ms Hayes also noted that applications for the Love Water Grants for 2026 have now closed. Grant applications are currently being assessed, and will be awarded this year for projects that improve water conservation, sustainability and wellbeing across the Hunter region.

Ms Hayes' presentation is available on the [SAF webpage](#).

RISK AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING AT HUNTER WATER

- **Duncan Rayward – Desalination Project Lead**
- **Tommy Zhang – Senior Project Manager**

Desalination Project Lead Duncan Rayward provided the group with an overview of progress on construction of the Belmont Desalination Plant.

Construction is expected to take four years, and the plant is on track to start producing water in 2028.

Onshore, the desalination plant buildings are under construction. Offshore marine works are underway, including building the direct ocean intake structure and tunnelling from the plant site to the ocean intake.

Hunter Water has worked with Lake Macquarie City Council and the local community to deliver community benefits alongside the project. This includes footpath upgrades in Belmont South in proximity to the plant, to reduce potential impacts associated with construction vehicles and provide a permanent connection from the Fernleigh track cycleway to the Lake Macquarie foreshore.

Construction updates are published monthly on the [Hunter Water website](#).

Mr Rayward's presentation is available on the [SAF webpage](#).

Members asked questions about construction and the eventual operation of the site, including:

Q: Will there be on-site water storage?

A: No, storage will only be provided for operational needs.

Q: Are there any risks of water contamination once the desalination plant is operational?

A: No. The desalination process removes impurities from the water.

Q: What is the impact of sea-level rise on construction?

A: Sea-level rise has been modelled using a range of sources. The construction level has been raised to account for this, and a sand dune buffer is being maintained for added protection.

Q: Is there flexibility to ramp energy use up or down once operational?

A: Yes, there is some flexibility, but within limits. The plant is designed to adjust output over time, producing up to 30 million litres of water per day during drought conditions and less at other times. However, it is not intended to be switched on and off quickly or run intermittently. It will operate most efficiently at a steady rate, ideally 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Energy use will vary in line with production levels, but changes are gradual rather than immediate. Energy costs for the first few years have been secured through a power purchase agreement, and the plant will be powered by 100% renewable energy.

Q: What will the workforce at the plant look like?

A: There is currently around 150 people working on site, peaking to around 400 people later in the year. Once fully operational, approximately 12 specialised staff are expected to be onsite on an ongoing basis.

Q: Can waste from the plant be recycled instead of discharged to the ocean?

A: The only by-product released to the ocean is concentrated seawater (brine). This is a more concentrated form of the natural salt already present in seawater. It will be safely discharged in line with the plant's environmental approvals.

Q: Why is the brine recovery at 60 per cent during operation of the plant?

A: Standard recovery rates for desalination are around 60 per cent. This reflects a balance between maximising fresh water production, maintaining efficient and reliable operation of the plant, and minimising environmental impacts from the brine discharge. Higher recovery rates would require more

energy and increase wear on the system, while lower rates would be less efficient in terms of water output.

OTHER BUSINESS

Further discussion and questions

Members asked who will be involved in the upcoming review of the Lower Hunter Water Security Plan.

The current Lower Hunter Water Security Plan (LHWSP) was developed in 2022 and was the strategic document that identified the need to build Belmont Desalination Plant.

Given proposed dam safety upgrades at both Grahamstown and Chichester Dams and the pause on the proposed Lostock–Glennies Creek Dam pipeline connection, Hunter Water is planning a targeted review of the LHWSP. This work will guide the preferred upgrades at both dams and identify future water security options to ensure a safe, reliable and resilient water supply for the Lower Hunter.

Technical work supporting the review will be led by Hunter Water. The NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) will oversee the formal government process, in collaboration with key agencies including the Dams Safety NSW, the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure and NSW Health.

Stakeholder engagement as part of the review will build on consultation undertaken for the 2022 plan and our 2025-2030 pricing plan.

Members inquired about the status of the Glennies Creek to Lostock Dam pipeline project. It was noted that the project is currently on hold due to government priorities and funding considerations. More information is available here:

<https://www.hunterwater.com.au/haveyoursay/lostock-dam-to-glennies-creek-pipeline-with-paterson-river-to-maitland-region-connection>

Water saving measures at home: Members suggested that the community consider using devices such as plastic shower capture devices, including SEVAS, as part of Hunter Water's Smart Water Choices.

Balancing water conservation and revenue: Members queried how Hunter Water encourages water conservation while maintaining revenue from water use. Hunter Water explained that its roles is to balance responsible resource management with supply and demand, managing demand until further supply investment is required, while continuing to provide an essential service.

Data Centres: members asked if there were any data centres planned in the Hunter, it was noted that there are none confirmed at present, although there may be potential in the future. Members requested that data centres be included as a topic for future discussion.

Members asked if Central Coast Council is considering a desalination plant. The Central Coast desalination plant referenced by members is the proposed Toukley Desalination Plant project, which is a drought response facility, whereas the Hunter Water desalination plant is intended for ongoing operational use.

Hunter Water is not directly involved in this project; however, Hunter Water works with Central Coast Council through the Hunter–Central Coast water sharing agreement. Central Coast Council is also represented on the advisory board for the Lower Hunter Water Security Plan.

Future meetings: Members suggested additional topics of interest for future SAF meetings:

- data centres
- recycled water

Members also suggested providing greater clarity in meeting agendas regarding the proposed outcomes of the SAF for each agenda item. This will be considered and incorporated into future agendas where appropriate.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the SAF is Tuesday 16 June 2026