



NSW DEPARTMENT OF  
PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

## **Irrigation Profile - Readers' Note**

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# **NSW Mid-Coast Region Irrigation Profile**

**Incorporating Hunter, Manning, Karuah  
and Central Coast catchments**

**compiled by Meredith Hope  
for the Water Use Efficiency Advisory Unit, Dubbo**

The Water Use Efficiency Advisory Unit is a  
NSW Government joint initiative between NSW Agriculture and the  
Department of Sustainable Natural Resources.

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NSW Agriculture (2003)

This Irrigation Profile is one of a series for NSW catchments and regions. It was written and compiled by Meredith Hope, NSW Agriculture, for the Water Use Efficiency Advisory Unit, 37 Carrington Street, Dubbo, NSW, 2830.

ISBN 0 7347 1337 1 (individual)

ISBN 0 7347 1372 X (series)

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job # 3146

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 AN OVERVIEW OF NSW MID-COAST IRRIGATION .....	1
1.2 IRRIGATION DATA ISSUES .....	3
1.2.1 <i>Scarcity of data</i> .....	3
1.2.2 <i>Lack of data at useful scales</i> .....	3
1.2.3 <i>Reliability</i> .....	3
1.2.4 <i>Storage of data not centralised</i> .....	4
1.3 CONCLUSION .....	4
<b>2. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 BACKGROUND.....	5
<b>3. METHODS.....</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1 SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTION .....	7
3.2 RATING DATA RELIABILITY .....	11
3.3 STRUCTURE OF PROFILE .....	11
<b>4. REGIONAL IRRIGATION OVERVIEW .....</b>	<b>13</b>
4.1 REGION DESCRIPTION .....	13
4.1.1 <i>Manning catchment</i> .....	13
4.1.2 <i>Karuah River, Great Lakes and associated catchments</i> .....	13
4.1.3 <i>Hunter catchment</i> .....	15
4.1.4 <i>Lake Macquarie, Tuggerah Lakes, and Brisbane Waters catchments</i> .....	16
4.2 CLIMATE .....	17
4.3 POPULATION .....	18
<b>5. IRRIGATION FROM ALL SOURCES.....</b>	<b>21</b>
5.1 DESCRIPTION OF IRRIGATION .....	21
5.1.1 <i>Manning catchment</i> .....	22
5.1.2 <i>Karuah River, Great Lakes and associated catchments</i> .....	22
5.1.3 <i>Hunter catchment</i> .....	22
5.1.4 <i>Lake Macquarie, Tuggerah Lakes, and Brisbane Waters catchments</i> .....	23
5.1.5 <i>Irrigation from all sources: summary</i> .....	23
5.2 NUMBER OF LICENCES (ALL SOURCES) .....	25
5.3 NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES USING IRRIGATION (ALL SOURCES) .....	25
5.4 AREA IRRIGATED AND WATER USED (ALL SOURCES).....	31
5.3.1 <i>NSW Mid-Coast region</i> .....	31
5.3.2 <i>Manning catchment</i> .....	33
5.3.3 <i>Karuah River, Great Lakes and associated catchments</i> .....	33
5.3.4 <i>Hunter catchment</i> .....	34
5.3.5 <i>Lake Macquarie, Tuggerah Lakes, and Brisbane Waters catchments</i> .....	34
5.5 IRRIGATION METHODS (ALL SOURCES).....	35
5.6 IRRIGATION YIELDS (ALL SOURCES) .....	35
5.7 VALUE OF IRRIGATED PRODUCTION (ALL SOURCES).....	36
5.6.1 <i>Hunter catchment</i> .....	36

<b>6.</b>	<b>IRRIGATION FROM REGULATED RIVERS.....</b>	<b>39</b>
6.1	DESCRIPTION OF THE REGULATED WATER SUPPLY .....	39
6.2	NUMBER OF LICENCES WITH THE PURPOSE OF IRRIGATION (REGULATED) .....	40
6.3	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES USING IRRIGATION (REGULATED) .....	41
6.4	VOLUMETRIC ENTITLEMENT TO IRRIGATION (REGULATED).....	41
6.5	AREA IRRIGATED AND WATER USED (REGULATED).....	42
6.6	IRRIGATION METHODS (REGULATED).....	42
6.7	IRRIGATED YIELDS (REGULATED).....	42
6.8	VALUE OF IRRIGATED PRODUCTION (REGULATED).....	42
<b>7.</b>	<b>IRRIGATION FROM UNREGULATED RIVERS.....</b>	<b>45</b>
7.1	ABOUT THE UNREGULATED WATER SUPPLY .....	45
7.2	NUMBER OF LICENCES (UNREGULATED).....	47
7.3	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES IRRIGATING (UNREGULATED) .....	47
7.4	AREA AUTHORISED FOR IRRIGATION (UNREGULATED).....	47
7.5	AREA IRRIGATED AND WATER USED (UNREGULATED) .....	47
7.6	IRRIGATION METHODS (UNREGULATED) .....	49
7.7	IRRIGATED YIELDS (UNREGULATED) .....	50
7.8	VALUE OF IRRIGATED PRODUCTION (UNREGULATED) .....	50
<b>8.</b>	<b>IRRIGATION FROM GROUNDWATER .....</b>	<b>51</b>
8.1	ABOUT GROUNDWATER SUPPLIES .....	51
8.2	NUMBER OF LICENCES WITH THE PURPOSE OF IRRIGATION (GROUNDWATER).....	55
8.3	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES IRRIGATING (GROUNDWATER) .....	55
8.4	VOLUMETRIC ENTITLEMENTS (GROUNDWATER).....	55
8.5	AREA IRRIGATED AND WATER USED (GROUNDWATER).....	55
8.6	IRRIGATION METHODS (GROUNDWATER) .....	56
8.7	IRRIGATED YIELDS (GROUNDWATER).....	56
8.8	TOTAL VALUE OF IRRIGATION (GROUNDWATER).....	56
<b>9.</b>	<b>IRRIGATION FROM FARM DAMS .....</b>	<b>57</b>
9.1	ABOUT FARM DAM WATER SUPPLIES.....	57
9.2	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES USING IRRIGATION (FARM DAMS).....	59
9.3	AREA IRRIGATED AND WATER USED (FARM DAMS) .....	59
9.4	IRRIGATION METHODS (FARM DAMS) .....	59
9.5	NUMBER OF LICENCES WITH THE PURPOSE OF IRRIGATION (FARM DAMS).....	57
9.6	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES USING IRRIGATION (FARM DAMS).....	57
9.7	AREA IRRIGATED AND WATER USED (FARM DAMS) .....	57
9.8	IRRIGATION METHODS (FARM DAMS) .....	58
9.9	IRRIGATED YIELDS (FARM DAMS).....	59
9.10	VALUE OF IRRIGATED PRODUCTION (FARM DAMS) .....	59
<b>10.</b>	<b>IRRIGATION FROM RETICULATED SUPPLIES .....</b>	<b>61</b>
10.1	ABOUT RETICULATED WATER SUPPLIES.....	61
10.2	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES USING IRRIGATION FROM RETICULATED SUPPLIES .....	61
10.3	AREA IRRIGATED AND WATER USED FROM RETICULATED SUPPLIES .....	61
10.4	IRRIGATION METHODS (RETICULATED SUPPLIES) .....	61
10.5	IRRIGATED YIELDS (RETICULATED SUPPLIES) .....	62
10.6	VALUE OF IRRIGATED PRODUCTION (RETICULATED SUPPLIES) .....	62

<b>11. OPPORTUNITIES AND ISSUES .....</b>	<b>63</b>
11.1 OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NSW MID-COAST REGION .....	63
11.1.1 <i>Opportunities for improving irrigation data</i> .....	63
11.1.2 <i>Opportunities for irrigation</i> .....	63
11.2 ISSUES FOR IRRIGATION IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION .....	64
11.2.1 <i>Data issues</i> .....	64
11.2.2 <i>Other issues for irrigation in the region:</i> .....	66
<b>12. SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>13. REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>71</b>
13.1 PERSONAL COMMUNICATION.....	76
<b>14. APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>77</b>
14.1 DEFINITIONS OF STATISTICAL UNITS USED BY THE ABS .....	77
14.2 SURFACE LICENCE-BASED CONCORDANCE WITH SLAs AND CATCHMENT BOUNDARIES IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION .....	79
14.2.1 <i>Hunter catchment</i> .....	79
14.2.2 <i>Karuah, Great Lakes and Associated catchments</i> .....	80
14.2.3 <i>Manning catchment</i> .....	80
14.2.4 <i>Lake Macquarie, Tuggerah Lakes, Brisbane Waters catchments</i> .....	80
14.3 RAINFALL AT GLOUCESTER (MANNING CATCHMENT) .....	81
14.4 RAINFALL AT STROUD (KARUAH, GREAT LAKES AND ASSOCIATED CATCHMENTS) .....	81
14.5 RAINFALL AT DENMAN (HUNTER CATCHMENT) .....	82
14.6 RAINFALL AT WYONG (LAKE MACQUARIE, TUGGERAH LAKES, AND BRISBANE WATERS CATCHMENTS) .....	82
14.7 POPULATION IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION.....	83
14.8 AREA IRRIGATED AND NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES IRRIGATING IN EACH SLA IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION .....	84
14.9 RAINFALL IN 1993–94, 1994–95 AND 1996–97 AND THE LONG-TERM MEAN RAINFALL IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION.....	85
14.10 ALLOCATION FROM GLENBAWN DAM IN THE HUNTER CATCHMENT .....	86
14.11 AREA IRRIGATED AND THE NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES USING IRRIGATION IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION .....	87
14.11.1 <i>Area: pasture</i> .....	87
14.11.2 <i>Number of enterprises: pasture</i> .....	87
14.11.3 <i>Area irrigated: vines</i> .....	88
14.11.4 <i>Number of enterprises, vines</i> .....	88
14.12 CROP INFORMATION FROM THE NSW MID-COAST REGION .....	89
14.13 VALUE OF IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE RELATIVE TO TOTAL AGRICULTURE IN THE HUNTER CATCHMENT .....	91
14.13.1 <i>Value: all crops and products</i> .....	91
14.13.2 <i>Value: livestock products</i> .....	91
14.13.3 <i>Value: grapes</i> .....	92
14.13.4 <i>Value: other crops</i> .....	92
14.13.5 <i>Value: vegetables</i> .....	93
14.13.6 <i>Value: crops for hay</i> .....	93
14.14 ABS QUESTION PROFILE .....	94
14.15 WATER ALLOCATED IN THE HUNTER CATCHMENT (ML/ANN.) .....	95
14.16 AREA IRRIGATED FROM REGULATED RIVERS, HUNTER CATCHMENT (HA) .....	96

14.17	VOLUME FROM REGULATED RIVERS USED BY CROPS, HUNTER CATCHMENT (ML/ANN.)	97
14.18	AREA (HA) OF CROPS IRRIGATED IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION FROM UNREGULATED RIVERS, AND WATER USE	98
14.18.1	<i>Crops, 1989–1993</i>	98
14.18.2	<i>Crops, 1993–1995</i>	99
14.19	TOTAL AREA IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION IRRIGATED FROM UNREGULATED RIVERS, BY CROP TYPE	101
14.20	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES AND AREA IRRIGATED (HA) BY WATER SOURCE IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	102
14.21	STRESSED STREAM CLASSIFICATION OF SUBCATCHMENTS IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	102

## List of Figures

FIGURE 1.	THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	9
FIGURE 2.	SLAs AND CATCHMENTS IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	10
FIGURE 3.	EVAPORATIVE DEFICIT AT SCONE AND PATERSON WEATHER STATIONS	18
FIGURE 4.	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES IRRIGATING IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	27
FIGURE 5.	AREA IRRIGATED (HA) IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	27
FIGURE 6.	TOTAL VALUE OF PRODUCE (%) THAT CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO IRRIGATION IN THE HUNTER CATCHMENT	28
FIGURE 7.	AREA OF IRRIGATED PASTURE (HA) IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	29
FIGURE 8.	AREA OF IRRIGATED GRAPES (HA) IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	30
FIGURE 9.	CLIMATIC ZONES USED FOR VOLUMETRIC CONVERSION	33
FIGURE 10.	LOCATION OF SURFACE LICENCES FOR THE PURPOSE OF IRRIGATION IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	43
FIGURE 11.	WATER ALLOCATION TO INDUSTRIES IN THE HUNTER CATCHMENT	44

## List of Tables

TABLE 1.	SUMMARY OF IRRIGATION DATA FOR THE NSW MID-COAST REGION IN 1996–97	2
TABLE 2.	EVAOs USED BY THE ABS TO COLLECT DATA ABOUT IRRIGATION IN NSW	8
TABLE 3.	FLOW CHARACTERISTICS OF MAJOR RIVERS IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	14
TABLE 4.	AVERAGE YEARLY FLOWS IN THE HUNTER CATCHMENT	16
TABLE 5.	LOCATION OF MAIN IRRIGATION CROPS IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	21
TABLE 6.	ALL SOURCES: SUMMARY OF IRRIGATION DATA, THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	24
TABLE 7.	NUMBER OF LICENCES BY SOURCE OF WATER	25
TABLE 8.	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES IRRIGATING IN EACH CATCHMENT	26
TABLE 9.	IRRIGATION REQUIREMENTS (ML) OF CROPS IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	32
TABLE 10.	REGULATED SUPPLY: SUMMARY OF IRRIGATION DATA	40
TABLE 11.	CHARACTERISTICS OF IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE FROM UNREGULATED STREAMS IN THE HUNTER CATCHMENT	45
TABLE 12.	UNREGULATED RIVERS: SUMMARY OF IRRIGATION DATA	46
TABLE 13.	CHANGE IN IRRIGATED AREA BY CROP TYPE BETWEEN 1993–94 AND 1998–99	48
TABLE 14.	WATER FROM UNREGULATED RIVERS USED BY IRRIGATION IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	49
TABLE 15.	GROUNDWATER RESOURCES AND USAGE IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	51
TABLE 16.	GROUNDWATER: SUMMARY OF IRRIGATION DATA	53
TABLE 17.	NUMBER OF ENTERPRISES IRRIGATING CROPS AND AREA IRRIGATED BY WATER SOURCE IN THE NSW MID-COAST REGION	54
TABLE 18.	FARM DAMS: IRRIGATION SUMMARY, NSW MID-COAST REGION	58
TABLE 19.	RETICULATED SUPPLIES: IRRIGATION SUMMARY, NSW MID-COAST REGION	62

***Acknowledgments:***

Thanks to the Water Management Fund for providing initial financial support to undertake this work.

Thanks also to:

- the Water Analysis and Audit Branch, Sustainable Water Management, Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC), Parramatta, now Water Management Systems, Natural Resources Products Division, Bridge Street, Sydney
- the Licence Administration Branch, DLWC, Parramatta, now Water Management Systems, Bridge Street, Sydney
- NSW Agriculture staff, especially Udai Pradhan, Norm Cross, Alan Richards, Pip Brock, and Danny Norris.

for their assistance in preparing this document.





# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The NSW Mid-Coast Region Irrigation Profile* was developed from a study to obtain regional and industry-based assessments of water use efficiency. The *Profile* details (where possible, by water source) what is known about:

- the number of irrigators
- the number of licences
- the entitled volume or area authorised for irrigation
- the area irrigated and water used in total and by crop type
- irrigated crop yields
- irrigation methods
- the value of irrigated agriculture

in the NSW Mid-Coast region.

The NSW Mid-Coast region includes the Manning catchment, the Karuah, Great Lakes and associated catchments, the Hunter catchment, and Lake Macquarie, Tuggerah Lakes, and Brisbane Waters catchments (also known as the Central Coast catchments). Irrigation data in the public domain were collected from State and Commonwealth sources, published research and industry reports and unpublished reports. These data were assigned a reliability rating using a system developed by the National Land and Water Resources Audit (1999).

This report does not attempt to calculate or analyse regional and industry-based estimates of WUE. This will be carried out in a subsequent report.

## 1.1 An overview of NSW Mid-Coast irrigation

Approximately 80% of the irrigated area in the NSW Mid-Coast region is in the Hunter catchment. The remainder is scattered along the major rivers and streams throughout the Manning, Karuah, Great Lakes and associated catchments and the Lake Macquarie, Tuggerah Lakes, and Brisbane Waters catchments. Approximately 14% of the State's irrigation licences exist in the NSW Mid-Coast region and 12% of the enterprises that irrigate are this region. Only 2% of the total area irrigated in New South Wales is in the NSW Mid-Coast region (Table 1).

Wine grapes and pasture for dairy cows are the two most important irrigated industries in the region. Eighty percent of the total area irrigated in the NSW Mid-Coast region is pasture, and 7% is wine grapes. The area irrigated on individual farms is small compared with the rest of the State. Broadarea and dairy properties in the NSW Mid-Coast region irrigate an average of 43 ha, compared with 189 ha on broadarea and dairy farms in the rest of New South Wales. A typical vineyard may irrigate 50 ha. The dominant method used to water pasture and lucerne is spray irrigation, while wine grapes are irrigated using drip.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Table 1. Summary of irrigation data for the NSW Mid-Coast region in 1996–97**

Source of water	Total irrigated area (ha)	Total water used by irrigated agriculture (ML)	Number irrigation licences	Number enterprises irrigating	Yield of major irrigated crop (t/ha)	Value of irrigation (\$ m)
NSW total	1,150,000	7,700,000	24,000	7,846	cotton 1.8	2,496
All sources, NSW Mid-Coast region	26,582	nd <i>Estimate</i> 114,700– 146,400	3,347	972	perennial pasture 15	nd 57, Hunter catchment only
Regulated, NSW Mid-Coast region	nd 10,704 – 22,053 (1989–90 to 1990–91)	nd 25,638 (1989–90)	788	nd <i>reg &amp; unreg.</i> 1,414 (1993–94)	nd	nd
Unregulated, NSW Mid-Coast region	17,298 (40% is perennial pasture)	nd 13,099 to 44,758 (1989–95)	1,759		nd	nd
Groundwater, NSW Mid-Coast region	nd 7,817 (1993–94)	nd 76,000 (1980)	800	nd 228 (1993–94)	nd	nd
Farm dams, NSW Mid-Coast region	nd 4,829 (1993–94)	nd	na	nd 232 (1993–94)	nd	nd
Town water supply, NSW Mid-Coast region	nd 262 (1993–94)	nd	na	nd 32 (1993–94)	nd	nd

nd = No data, na = Not applicable

The total value of irrigated agriculture in the Hunter catchment was \$57 million in 1996–97. This represented roughly 2% of the total value of irrigated agriculture in New South Wales. A large proportion of this irrigated value can be attributed to livestock products (\$31 million). Wine grapes were the next most valuable industry (\$14 million).

### 1.2 Irrigation data issues

There were a number of data issues raised in the NSW Mid-Coast region Irrigation Profile. Generally, these relate to the scarcity of data, the lack of data at useful scales and the reliability of available data.

#### 1.2.1 Scarcity of data

In the past, data have been collected for purposes (for example, DLWC billing and regulation requirements) which are different from the current needs for natural resource planning and for the planning and management of irrigation industry: data collected for these purposes are scant or missing.

Collection strategies affect the usefulness of data. Strategies employed by the ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) mean that only years with the same EVAO<sup>1</sup> can be compared.

#### 1.2.2 Lack of data at useful scales

Point-scale data collected by ABS and ABARE (Australian Bureau of Agricultural Resource Economics) are confidential and have been reported at SLA, catchment or Agro-Ecological Region scales (AER). These scales limit how usable these data are for local users, who often need information at much smaller scales such as river reach or subcatchment.

#### 1.2.3 Reliability

Reliability varied with collection strategy and by source of water. For example, irrigation data from regulated rivers were more reliable compared with irrigation data from unregulated, groundwater and farm dam sources. Extraction from regulated rivers is metered and data are collected for DLWC billing purposes. For all other sources, there has been no requirement by the DLWC to collect information about extraction. Voluntary surveys were used to collect data from the unregulated system. Poor survey return rates and farmer estimates of water use (rather than metered water use) reduce the reliability of the captured data.

The reliability of data is not always reported by State agencies. It is difficult to know what level of confidence to place in data-sets obtained from agencies.

Animosity by irrigators toward data-collecting agencies may downgrade the reliability of captured data.

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<sup>1</sup> The population to be surveyed is determined from the Estimated Value of Agricultural Operations or EVAO is estimated from a procedure that takes into account the value of the area of crops sown and the numbers of livestock on holdings at a point in time as well as the crops produced and the livestock turnoff during the year. The resultant aggregation of these commodity values is termed the EVAO.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## 1.2.4 Storage of data not centralised

Storage of data is not centralised. Information on yields, areas, water use, methods and value were drawn from many different sources.

## 1.3 Conclusion

A more comprehensive and consistent approach to the collection of irrigation statistics is needed. This would help to ensure that data are comparable across different water sources and industries. The following are needed to improve the situation.

- Crop data are needed, that is, crop water use and irrigated area. Better monitoring is needed to help develop strategies to manage and effectively balance environmental and irrigation industry water needs.
- Data are needed at scales that are large enough to protect point-scale confidentiality (for example, enterprise level) but small enough to allow users to aggregate information to useful scales.
- Protocols for provision of data to users are needed. For example, information providers need to attach reliability ratings to data. This will help users make better decisions about the usefulness of the data and will help prevent users manipulating data inappropriately.
- Two-way flow of information between agencies and irrigators needs to be fostered. Typically, data have been extracted from irrigators by agencies. These data need to flow back to irrigators in forms that might assist them make better water management decisions. This could in turn, over time, improve the reliability of information that is collected from irrigators.

Finally, such a comprehensive approach can only be developed with the full involvement of the many irrigators, agencies and community groups that require these data.