

'Vandalism': NSW gives way on Snowy oversight as wild rivers flow briefly again

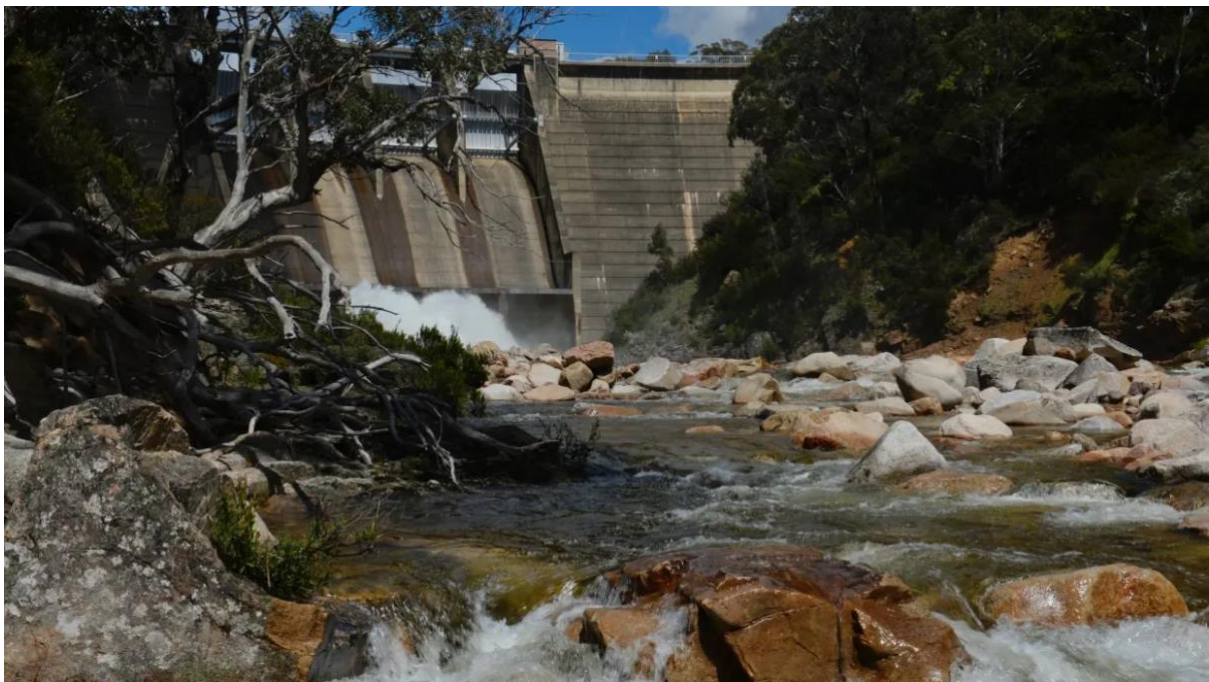


By [Peter Hannam](#)

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The Berejiklian government will act to introduce an advisory committee to oversee Snowy Hydro Corporation, years after passing a law abolishing the sole panel charged with supervising the scheme's environmental impact.

In September 2014, then water minister Kevin Humphries trumpeted the passage of a law replacing the Snowy Scientific Committee with a broader advisory panel, saying it would "ensure a balance between technical and water management expertise, scientific specialists and government, Indigenous and community representation".



The Snowy River just downstream from the Island Bend Dam.*CREDIT: NICK MOIR*

But the Coalition government never took the routine step of having the new law proclaimed so the replacement committee has never existed.

A spokeswoman for Water Minister Niall Blair told the *Herald* the proclamation "should be within the fortnight", and that Mr Blair "wants to get the [advisory] committee established as soon as possible".



Workers at the Burrungabugge River on Friday. *CREDIT: NICK MOIR*

"The make-up of this committee is really important for the local community and everyone who relies on a healthy Snowy River, and nominations will be called shortly, with the committee to operational in the New Year," John Barilaro, NSW Nationals leader, said.

The absence of independent oversight for years and uncertainty of the make-up of the commitment, however, mean concerns linger.

"Currently there is a complete dearth of independent scientific research on the state of the rivers and catchment in the Snowy Scheme, which is the most environmentally damaging water diversion scheme in the whole of Australia," Louise Crisp, a spokeswoman for the Gippsland Environment Group, said.

The delay in replacing the committee is the latest in a string of controversies involving water in NSW, which have included allegations of theft that have sparked a slew of enquiries and concern about the health of the Murray-Darling Basin.



An expert panel recommended as far back as 1998 to remove an aqueduct that would have restored partial natural flows on the Gungarlin. *CREDIT: GIPPSLAND ENVIRONMENT GROUP*

Rivers run again

The absence of an oversight body comes as the Snowy Water Licence is under a 10-year mandatory review, and, coincidentally, two tributaries of the Snowy River have had their first consistent flows since 1965 because of the failure of a diversion shaft in September.

The Burrungabugge and Gungarlin rivers, both within the Kosciuszko National Park above Jindabyne, are now normally dry except for the few times a year when a weir overflows or the 110-metre shaft is closed for standard maintenance.



A photograph of "dry" Burringabugge River - which has stopped regular flows since 1965.*CREDIT: GIPPSLAND ENVIRONMENT GROUP*

Ms Crisp said an expert panel recommended as far back as 1998 to remove an aqueduct that would have restored partial natural flows on the Gungarlin.

A subsequent 2009-10 review of the Snowy Montane Rivers recommended Gungarlin get 20 per cent of its natural flow restored by 2012. Authorities ignored both calls.

"How can Snowy Hydro or the NSW government justify the complete extinguishment of two rivers in [the national park] in the 21st century?," Ms Crisp said. "What was acceptable in the 1950s is definitely not acceptable now – it's simply environmental vandalism."

Minister Blair's spokeswoman said the urgent repairs of the shaft were now complete at the Burrungabugge intake, and flows would be captured for hydro electricity generation "as designed".

"Permanently releasing water from Burrungabugge and Gungarlin rivers and stopping releases from Tolbar and Diggers creeks would result in 4.5 kilometres of the Snowy River below Island Bend Dam receiving no environmental water," she said.

Ms Crisp said that while it was correct using Tolbar and Diggers creeks meant more of the Snowy received environmental flows, the two could not deliver the scheduled 29 gigalitre per year flows because their combined mean annual flow is about 22GL/year or less.

By contrast, Gungarlin and Burrungabugge aqueducts divert about 138GL/year into the Burrungabugge shaft, Snowy Hydro said.

"They were two beautiful rivers that were just cut off," Sam Lake, a former member of the scientific panel, said, adding that discussion about the current use of their water was just what the committee would have debated.

"We got lots of criticism when we were operating," Dr Lake said. "We thought we were protected in the way we were set up."

'Not credible'

Jeremy Buckingham, the Greens water spokesman, said the Coalition government's refusal to listen to independent expert advice on water resource management was "shameful".

The government had now been "dragged kicking and screaming" to finally proclaim the law to establish the advisory panel.

"The claim that this three-year delay was simply administrative is not credible," he said. "It is clear that the real reason they have not set up the Snowy Advisory Committee is because they do not want to be held to account on the adequacy of crucial environmental flows."

Chris Minns, Labor's water spokesman, said there was a wider effort to remove scientific oversight of water management, whether for Sydney's water catchment, regional NSW or the Snowy.

"The former minister's insistence that scientists will be replaced with an independent panel was particularly cynical considering no such committee was ever established," he said.

"When it comes to water policy in NSW you can't rely on what the National Party say, only what they do," he said, adding it was time to strip the Nationals of control of the water portfolio.

"Operational responsibility for environmental water flows in the Snowy is being transferred to the Office of Environment & Heritage, a commonsense move that brings NSW environmental water management under the one agency," Mr Blair's spokeswoman said.

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Labor and the Greens may get part of that wish fulfilled.



[Peter Hannam](#) wrote on environment issues for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. Connect via [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or [email](#).