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Rising temperatures deplete dams; El Niño sets in for summer

Hunter Water is encouraging the Lower Hunter community to save water in preparation for a hot and dry summer, with the Bureau of Meteorology declaring El Niño and the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) declaring the region in drought, all on the back of the Lower Hunter sweltering under a record spell of heat over the last month.

The unseasonably warm weather is a taste of what's to come in the months ahead, stirring recent memories of the spring and summer of 2019 – drought and water restrictions.

Hunter Water Managing Director Darren Cleary noted the region's water storages are relatively healthy (86.4%) after a wet couple of years, but that doesn't leave us in the clear.

"We've learned how unpredictable the climate can be. We can go from healthy water storage levels to empty in just three years. That may sound like a fair amount of time, but it's not when you're looking at what we might need to do to ensure our region doesn't run out of water," Mr Cleary said.

"But one of the easiest and most important things we can do is make the most of what we've got."

Since water restrictions ended in 2020, the Lower Hunter region has kept water consumption down by around 9%, bringing individual usage down to 174L per person per day.

"It's great that the Lower Hunter community has held on to some of the positive water conservation behaviours. It's important not to become complacent, with further reductions in water usage helping delay the onset of restrictions.

"We need to continue to make Smart Water Choices so our supply lasts longer. That means using a trigger nozzle, watering the garden before 10am and after 4pm, and using a broom to clean driveways. That way, when we potentially enter restrictions, we all know what we need to do," Mr Cleary said.

Drought conditions have returned to the region, with rainfall over the last three months being in the bottom 10% of rainfall totals for this time of year. Chichester Dam's storage level dropped by 2.2% in the previous week to 61%. If the current conditions continue, the Lower Hunter could approach the need for water restrictions by March next year.

Hunter Water has developed the **Lower Hunter Water Security Plan** with the NSW Government to ensure the region has a resilient and sustainable water future. Planning has commenced for the design and build of the Belmont desalination plant, as well as investigations into a connection on the Paterson River and a two-way pipeline between Lostock Dam and Glennies Creek Dam.

"We're also treating and supplying groundwater from the borefields in the Tomago Sandbeds to ensure our borefield pumps and pipelines are ready for our customers and community," Mr Cleary said.

The Sandbeds are a safe and reliable backup water supply that can provide 20 per cent of the Lower Hunter's drinking water during a shortfall.

To learn more about how you can make Smart Water Choices, visit www.hunterwater.com.au/smartchoices

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