



QUEENSLAND
FARMERS'
FEDERATION



Mitchell Water Plan review **September 2025**

Prepared by

Jo Sheppard, CEO, QFF
E: qfarmers@qff.org.au

Prepared for

Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers
Water Planning and Science, North Region

Contents page

About the Queensland Farmers' Federation	2
Submission	2
Executive summary	2
Introduction	3
Reform of water harvesting rules	3
Release of unallocated water reserves	3
Off-stream storage	4
Streamlined approvals and regulation	4
Cross-catchment opportunities	5
Conclusion.....	5

This submission is provided to:

Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers
1 William Street, Brisbane, Qld, 4001

Submitted via email: NorthWPS@rdmw.qld.gov.au

Our members

- Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers
- Cotton Australia
- Canegrowers
- Greenlife Industry QLD
- eastAUSmilk
- Australian Cane Farmers Association
- Queensland United Egg Producers
- Turf Queensland
- Pork Queensland
- Australian Chicken Meat Federation
- Bundaberg Regional Irrigators Group
- Burdekin River Irrigation Area
- Central Downs Irrigators Ltd
- Fairburn Irrigation Network
- Mallawa Irrigation
- Pioneer Valley Water Co-operative Ltd
- Theodore Water Pty Ltd
- Eton Irrigation
- Lockyer Valley Water Users

About the Queensland Farmers' Federation

The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland.

Our members are agricultural peak bodies who collectively represent more than 13,000 farmers who produce food, fibre and foliage across the state.

QFF's peak body members come together to develop policy and lead projects on the key issues that are important to their farmer members and the Queensland agriculture sector.

Together, we form a strong, unified voice leveraging our effectiveness by working together to drive policy and initiatives that support a strong future for Queensland agriculture.

Submission

QFF welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers on the Mitchell Water Plan review. We provide this submission without prejudice to any additional submission from our members or individual farmers.

Executive summary

The Mitchell Water Plan review is an opportunity to deliver practical reforms that gives growers the certainty needed to invest in their operations and increase productivity. Agriculture in the Mitchell and neighbouring cross catchment regions is estimated to contribute over \$768 million in the gross value of production in 2025, with horticulture including avocados, bananas, mangoes and other fruit and nuts providing significant economic and employment benefits to Queensland.

The Minister's 2023 Performance Assessment Report confirmed that ecological outcomes are being met however, this has largely been achieved through limited development rather than a balanced framework that supports both environmental health and agricultural growth. Ongoing concerns for farmers in the region can be attributed to existing restrictions to harvesting and storage rules, and uncertainty about when and how the unallocated reserves will become available.

QFF acknowledges the current review of unallocated water reserves in the Mitchell under the 'Unlocking Water Project' and welcome this process as an important step toward bringing water to the market. Progressing this review serves as an impactful driver supporting agricultural development, particularly in regions where demand for additional water has been demonstrated.

The review must now focus on reforms that enable confidence for farmers to invest, unlock new production opportunities, and expand the regions already significant economic contribution. By enabling provisions in the Plan to increase water harvesting and supporting off-stream storages, the Plan can also improve drought preparedness and climate resilience, ensuring water is available to sustain crops, employment, and the regional economy during dry periods while safeguarding the ecological values of the Mitchell system.

Introduction

The Mitchell River catchment is one of Queensland's most prospective regions, poised for investment due to the proven soils, favourable growing climate, and access to markets. While irrigated agriculture is established in parts of the catchment, growth in agriculture within the region has largely been constrained due to limited and uncertain access to water.

The 2023 Minister's Performance Report highlighted irrigation development has remained limited under the current Plan. This finding should act as a clear trigger for government to examine and address the constraints within the existing framework that are inhibiting growth and investment. The statutory review provides the opportunity to deliver overdue reforms, enabling confidence, production expansion, and strengthen the region's economic contribution, while safeguarding the long-term health of the Mitchell system.

Reform of water harvesting rules

Current rules within the Plan restrict overland flow storages to 250ML without a licence, a limit that is impractical for commercial horticulture and cropping. The Minister's report explicitly links ecological outcomes to the absence of large storages, demonstrating a lack of provisions within the existing Plan for the development and storage of on-farm scale water storage solutions.

Reforming existing harvesting rules will allow irrigators to capture wet season flows within environmental thresholds and grant growers the certainty needed to invest in expanding production. Furthermore, flexibility in water harvesting arrangements complements a grower's ability to enhance drought preparedness and climate resilience, ensuring water can be stored in times of abundance, and accessed to sustain perennial crops, jobs, and regional economies through dry periods.

QFF recommends:

The revision of water harvesting limits to reflect the scale required for commercial agriculture and irrigation precincts.

Enable the capture of wet season flows to bolster drought preparedness and strengthen resilience to climate variability.

Release of unallocated water reserves

Current licensed volumes in the Plan area represent a small fraction of the total volume of water available, with 55,000 megalitres still held in unallocated general reserves. Strategically releasing this water is essential to unlocking the region's potential for agricultural growth.

QFF acknowledges the Department's current project to bring unallocated water to market and sees the statutory review as the mechanism to set a clear pathway and timeframe for release, giving irrigations within the region the certainty they require to Plan, invest, and expand production.

QFF recommends:

Progress the staged release of unallocated water reserves with clear timeframes that provide certainty to growers.

Prioritise allocations in regions where demand has been demonstrated and opportunities for growth are well established.

Off-stream storage

Future climate forecasts are projected to increase evaporation, reduce waterhole persistence, and undermine supply reliability. Off-stream storages provide a practical, lower impact solution by capturing wet season flows for use during dry periods without impeding the main river channel.

A provision within the next iteration of the Plan to support off-stream storages will enhance water reliability for individual growers and local irrigation precincts, strengthen grower confidence to invest and build resilience to drought and climate variability protecting production across variable seasons.

QFF recommends:

Explicitly recognise farm/precinct scale off-stream storages as a supported options for water security and resilience.

Reduce regulatory barriers for irrigators to construct and operate off-stream storages within agreed environmental thresholds.

Provisions with the Plan to encourage private and precinct investment in grower-led water storage solutions.

Streamlined approvals and regulation

Currently complex approval processes and overlap with vegetation management rules continue to constrain and discourage investment in on-farm water storage solutions. In particular, the interaction between water planning approvals and vegetation management rules creates uncertainty for growers, adding costs to project development, often resulting in delays in on-farm water infrastructure investment.

A clearer framework is required to reduce duplication and give growers certainty. This will enable timely and responsible investment in water storage solutions, improving water security, drought preparedness and a key driver of regional growth.

QFF recommends:

Align water planning and vegetation management frameworks to remove duplication.

Adoption of a risk-based approach that streamlines approvals for lower-impact water storage solutions.

Provide clearer guidance to allow landowners to navigate applications and approvals with confidence.

Cross-catchment opportunities

The Palmer and Walsh Rivers generate significant seasonal flows that are currently underutilised. The review of the Mitchell Water Plan should ensure these flows can be considered in future allocation frameworks to provide the flexibility and mechanism to support the future development of irrigation areas within and adjacent to the Plan area.

QFF recommends:

Review and examine the potential benefits of the inclusion of hydrological data from the Palmer and Walsh Rivers into the next iteration of the Plan.

Conclusion

Agriculture in the Mitchell Water Plan area and neighbouring cross-catchment regions is a significant contributor to the Queensland economy, with production from horticulture, irrigated cropping and perennial tree orchards, underpinning jobs, exports, and sustaining local communities. Despite the region's well-recognised growth potential, the current water planning framework constrains farmers' ability to capture wet season flows, limiting expansion and holding back the investment needed to realise the region's full growth potential.

The review of the Mitchell Water Plan is the opportunity to put in place the reforms needed to give growers certainty, expand production in the region, and improve resilience to climate variability and drought. QFF's recommendations to reform water harvesting rules, progress the release of unallocated reserves, support off-stream storage options, streamline approvals, and consideration of cross-catchment opportunities provide a practical pathway forward.

QFF acknowledges and welcomes the Department's current work to bring unallocated water to the market and encourages this body of work to be delivered in step with broader reforms necessary in the next iteration of the Plan. Taken together, these actions will unlock new investment and increase the region's economic contribution, whilst ensuring the long-term balance between agricultural growth and environmental outcomes in the Mitchell Water Plan footprint.

Yours sincerely



Jo Sheppard
Chief Executive Officer



This submission is provided by the Queensland Farmers' Federation

PO Box 12009 George Street, Brisbane Qld 4003
Level 8, 183 North Quay, Brisbane Qld 4000
ABN 44 055 764 488

Contact QFF

E: qfarmers@qff.org.au
P: 07 3837 4720
W: www.qff.org.au

