



QUEENSLAND
FARMERS'
FEDERATION



Draft Gulf Regional Water Assessment Report Response August 2026

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Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers

Contents page

About the Queensland Farmers' Federation	2
Submission.....	2
A strong framework for future agricultural development	2
Unlocking productive agricultural water use	3
Maintaining flexibility across the gulf	4
Regulatory certainty will determine success	4
Water markets and long-term implementation.....	5
Agriculture delivers enduring regional prosperity.....	5
Conclusion	5

This submission is provided to:

Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers
Director Northern Water Planning
Gulf Regional Water Assessment.

Submitted via email regionalwaterassessments@dlgww.qld.gov.au

Our members

- Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers
- Cotton Australia
- CANEGROWERS
- Greenlife Industry QLD
- eastAUSmilk
- Timber Queensland
- 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
- Mallowa 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

The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Gulf Regional Water Assessment (RWA) and acknowledges the significant work undertaken by the Queensland Government in developing a comprehensive, evidence-based framework to guide future productive water use across the Gulf region.

We provide this submission without prejudice to any additional submission from our members or individual farmers.

QFF supports the Assessment's recognition that agriculture will play a significant role in the region's future prosperity and agrees that enabling private investment in distributed on-farm water infrastructure represents the most practical pathway for increasing productive water use.

The Assessment also arrives at an important time for Queensland agriculture. Continued expansion of irrigated cotton, together with increasing demand for cottonseed from Queensland's livestock industries, demonstrates the growing integration of the State's agricultural sectors and the value generated through productive water use. Alongside this growth, the Gulf is well positioned to support emerging opportunities associated with renewable feedstocks, biofuels and low-emissions manufacturing, creating new opportunities to diversify regional agriculture and contribute to Queensland's emerging bioeconomy.

QFF considers the greatest opportunity now lies in implementation. The final Regional Water Assessment should provide a flexible framework that enables productive water use across the broader Gulf region, improves regulatory certainty for agricultural development and supports efficient water markets that encourage long-term regional investment.

A strong framework for future agricultural development

QFF supports the overall direction of the Draft RWA and its recognition that the Gulf possesses some of Queensland's greatest long-term opportunities for agricultural development.

The Assessment appropriately shifts the conversation away from reliance on major publicly funded water infrastructure towards enabling private investment in distributed on-farm water infrastructure. QFF considers this approach reflects the way modern irrigation development

increasingly occurs across Queensland, allowing investment decisions to be driven by commercial opportunity while reducing the need for significant public expenditure.

QFF also welcomes the integration of the RWA with the Gulf Water Plan Review, the Unlocking Water Project and Primary Industries Prosper 2050. Aligning these initiatives provides greater confidence that future water planning, investment and regional development will occur in a coordinated and strategic manner.

The challenge is now ensuring this strategic framework translates into practical investment opportunities that deliver productive water use, agricultural growth and lasting regional prosperity.

Unlocking productive agricultural water use

Agriculture has long been recognised as a cornerstone of the Gulf economy and the draft Assessment appropriately identifies significant opportunities for future growth.

While current interest is largely associated with irrigated cotton and broadacre cropping, Queensland agriculture continues to diversify. Future demand may include horticulture, permanent tree crops, legumes, fodder production and emerging agricultural industries that require reliable, affordable and secure access to water.

Importantly, the RWA should not simply respond to today's agricultural industries but create the conditions that enable tomorrow's industries to emerge.

One of the most significant long-term opportunities lies in the continued diversification of agricultural production supported by reliable access to water. While irrigated cotton is expected to remain an important driver of future development, its contribution extends well beyond fibre production. Demand for cottonseed as a high-value livestock feed continues to grow across Queensland's beef, dairy and intensive livestock industries, demonstrating how productive water use can generate value across multiple agricultural sectors while strengthening whole-of-supply-chain resilience.

Beyond traditional agricultural production, the Gulf also has the potential to become a nationally significant production region supplying renewable agricultural feedstocks for sustainable aviation fuel (SAF), renewable diesel, bioenergy and other low-emissions manufacturing industries. These emerging markets represent an opportunity to further diversify regional agriculture while creating new value chains that complement existing food and fibre production.

As Australia continues its transition towards lower-emissions energy and transport systems, demand for sustainably produced agricultural feedstocks is expected to increase substantially. The Gulf's combination of available land, water resources and proximity to northern export and processing opportunities places the region in a strong position to contribute to these future industries.

The development of renewable feedstock industries represents more than simply growing different crops. It offers opportunities to diversify farming businesses, strengthen regional resilience, encourage downstream processing, attract private investment and create entirely new agricultural value chains across northern Queensland. Supporting renewable feedstock production also aligns with the Queensland Government's broader objectives for decarbonisation, regional manufacturing and the development of Queensland's emerging

bioeconomy, positioning the Gulf as a future hub for bio industrial supply chains and value-added agricultural production.

QFF therefore encourages implementation of the Regional Water Assessment to remain sufficiently adaptive to support emerging industries as they mature. Periodic engagement with industry to ground-truth future agricultural water demand will ensure implementation continues to reflect changing markets, technologies and production systems.

Maintaining flexibility across the gulf

The draft Assessment appropriately prioritises those catchments where current demand and supporting evidence are strongest.

However, QFF considers the implementation of the RWA should retain sufficient flexibility to support productive agricultural development wherever sustainable opportunities emerge across the broader Gulf region.

While the Flinders and Gilbert catchments are expected to drive much of the initial agricultural expansion, other river systems including the Cloncurry and the Leichardt catchments may present significant opportunities as agricultural diversification, technology, processing capability and market conditions continue to evolve.

QFF is not suggesting these catchments require the same level of immediate investigation or investment. Rather, they should remain within the implementation framework so emerging opportunities can be assessed on their merits as demand develops.

Maintaining this flexibility will ensure the RWA remains relevant over coming decades and avoids unintentionally limiting future regional development because today's priorities differ from tomorrow's.

Regulatory certainty will determine success

The success of the Regional Water Assessment will ultimately depend on whether agricultural businesses are able to convert identified opportunities into productive investment.

The draft Assessment acknowledges that vegetation clearing requirements may constrain irrigation development in parts of the Gulf. QFF considers this challenge extends more broadly to the regulatory framework surrounding irrigation development, including approvals for off-stream storages, irrigation infrastructure and associated farm works.

In addition to Queensland regulatory requirements, agricultural developments may also require consideration under Commonwealth legislation, including the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. While environmental protections remain essential, uncertainty surrounding approval pathways can create significant investment risk.

Consequently, some irrigators may possess suitable land, available water and the financial capacity to invest, yet remain unable to proceed because approval requirements are unclear, duplicated or subject to lengthy assessment processes.

QFF encourages the Queensland and Australian Governments to work collaboratively to provide coordinated, transparent and timely approval pathways that support environmentally responsible agricultural development. Improving regulatory certainty will be fundamental to ensuring the opportunities identified through the Regional Water Assessment translate into productive water use across the Gulf.

Water markets and long-term implementation

QFF supports continued reform that improves access to available water while maintaining confidence in Queensland's water entitlement framework.

Implementation of the Regional Water Assessment should continue to align with the Gulf Water Plan Review and the Unlocking Water Project to improve water market flexibility, facilitate movement of water to its highest value use and maximise productive water consumption across the region.

QFF also considers that implementation should remain adaptive through regular engagement with industry to validate future agricultural water demand and ensure water planning continues to reflect changing production systems, regional investment and emerging industries.

Agriculture delivers enduring regional prosperity

QFF recognises that the Gulf's future prosperity will be supported by a diverse regional economy that includes agriculture, mining, critical minerals and other productive industries.

The Regional Water Assessment appropriately recognises the importance of balancing these competing demands while protecting environmental and cultural values.

Agriculture, however, provides enduring regional value. Productive water use supports family farming businesses, regional employment, downstream processing, export industries and resilient regional communities that continue to generate economic and social benefits across generations. The continued growth of irrigated cotton is a strong example of this, delivering benefits that extend well beyond fibre production through increasing demand for cottonseed across Queensland's beef, dairy and intensive livestock industries, strengthening resilience across the broader agricultural economy.

As new agricultural industries emerge, particularly those supporting renewable feedstocks and Australia's growing bioeconomy, the long-term value of productive water use will continue to expand. Water allocated to agriculture has the capacity to produce not only food and fibre, but also the feedstocks required for sustainable aviation fuel, renewable fuels and other bio-based manufacturing opportunities.

Implementation of the Regional Water Assessment should continue to recognise agriculture as a long-term regional asset and ensure future water development opportunities are considered alongside their enduring economic, community and strategic benefits.

Conclusion

QFF supports the overall direction of the Draft Gulf Regional Water Assessment and considers it provides a strong strategic foundation for unlocking productive water use across northern Queensland.

The Assessment identifies significant opportunities to grow Queensland agriculture through coordinated planning, investment confidence and efficient water management. Continued expansion of irrigated cotton, growing demand for cottonseed from the livestock sector and the emergence of renewable feedstock industries together demonstrate the Gulf's capacity to support a more diversified and resilient agricultural economy.

To realise this potential, implementation of the Regional Water Assessment should remain sufficiently flexible to support opportunities across all Gulf catchments, improve regulatory

certainty for irrigation development and strengthen the policy settings that encourage productive investment and innovation.



With the right planning and investment framework, the Gulf can become far more than Queensland's next irrigation region. It has the potential to become a nationally significant region for agricultural innovation—producing food, fibre and renewable feedstocks that strengthen regional prosperity, support Queensland's emerging bioeconomy and contribute to Australia's transition to a lower-emissions future.

QFF looks forward to continuing to work collaboratively with the Queensland Government to translate the opportunities identified in the Regional Water Assessment into lasting benefits for Queensland agriculture, regional communities and the State's broader economy.

Yours sincerely

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QFF Water and Energy Policy Committee



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