

Frequently Asked Questions

Drought Management Plan

Water Security for Norfolk Island

What is a drought?

A drought happens when there is less rainfall than usual over a long period of time. On Norfolk Island, this means our rainwater tanks don't refill, groundwater drops, and water cartage demand increases.

While drought is a natural event, it can turn into a disaster if we are not prepared. That's why resilience planning - like water conservation, extra tank storage, and desalination - is so important.

Why are droughts considered a "quiet disaster"?

Droughts are considered a "quiet disaster" because they are slow-onset events with no immediate, dramatic signs like floods or sirens, making them easy to ignore despite their devastating and cumulative impacts on community, livelihoods, and the environment.

Because there is no single "big event", people sometimes don't notice the danger until it becomes very serious.

This "slow-moving disaster" creates a prolonged period of water shortage and environmental imbalance that can lead to food insecurity, financial hardship, and other crises over time.

Why do we need a Drought Management Plan?

Norfolk Island relies heavily on rainwater tanks and limited groundwater. During extended dry periods, water shortages can affect households, businesses, agriculture, and the environment. A plan helps us prepare, conserve, and adapt so the community and businesses are better safeguarded.

Our geographic isolation means we need to be self-reliant and for this to work effectively we need a plan which reflects lessons learnt and takes a coordinated approach.

Why does Norfolk Island need a desalination plant?

Norfolk Island relies heavily on rainwater tanks and limited groundwater. During droughts, water supplies can run low. The desalination plant converts seawater into drinking water, giving the island a reliable back-up source when rainfall is scarce, protecting the overuse of groundwater. It doesn't replace rainwater tanks - it supports households, businesses, and essential services during drought.

The desalination plant can produce 20,000 litres per day or 140,000 every 7 days. Forecast modelling is underway to review if increased capacity is required.

Where is the desalination plant located?

The plant is installed near the Cascade Pier, where it can draw seawater and be connected to existing water cartage and storage facilities.

Is desalination safe for the environment?

Yes. Reverse Osmosis desalination is one the safest and most effective way to produce fresh water. After the filtering process, there are two streams: one brine and the other freshwater. The brine solution is returned to the sea. Regular testing is performed to monitor quality of water and brine discharge.

Who will be able to access desalinated water?

Desalinated water will be made available through the island's water carters. This ensures households, businesses, and essential services can access supply when their rainwater tanks run low.



Frequently Asked Questions

Drought Management Plan - Water Security for Norfolk Island

Does this mean we don't need rainwater tanks anymore?

Rainwater tanks remain the primary water source for homes and businesses. Desalination is designed as a safety net, not a replacement. The goal is to strengthen drought resilience, not reduce self-reliance.

How does this help with drought resilience?

- Provides a secure back-up supply when rainfall is low.
- Reduces reliance on groundwater and protects fragile ecosystems.
- Supports tourism, business, health services, and community needs during dry periods.
- Works alongside water conservation, tank management, and community awareness.

How will the community be supported?

The Drought Management Plan sets out actions for:

- Prioritising water for essential services (hospital, aged care, schools).
- Public awareness campaigns to encourage conservation.
- Working with community groups and businesses to share responsibility.
- Supports tourism and businesses.

What can households do to ensure their own water security?

- Monitor tank levels regularly.
- Install extra or larger tanks if possible.
- Fix leaks and install water saving taps and shower heads.
- Maintain tanks, gutters, and pipes so you get the most from rainfall.
- Use water wisely - prioritise drinking, cooking, and hygiene during dry times.
- Collect and reuse grey water.

What happens when tanks run low?

Households and businesses can order water from water carters. During drought, delivery times can increase, so planning ahead is important. Desalinated water will also be available through water carters as a safety net. Don't let your tanks or bores run dry - this can become a costly exercise, as you may need to engage a plumber to restart or replace burnt out pumps as a result.

What about our gardens?

Growers are encouraged to:

- Improve on-site water storage and collection.
- Use efficient irrigation (drip or timed watering).
- Plant drought-tolerant edible produce and trees where possible.
- Reuse grey water.
- Prioritise edible crop over ornamental plants.

What's next for water security on Norfolk Island?

Addressing droughts in the long term requires a multi-faceted approach that combines both sustainable water management practices and innovative technologies as outlined in the Drought Management Plan, which include:

- Better monitoring of rainwater tank levels.
- Encouraging larger or additional water storage.
- Protecting groundwater.
- Working with the community and tourism to reduce wastage and plan for dry times.
- The desalination plant.

What's the long-term goal?

To create a self-sufficient and resilient Norfolk Island, where:

- Everyone understands their role in conserving water.
- Infrastructure (tanks, desalination, monitoring) supports reliability.
- The community works together to safeguard water for future generations.

