

IMPLEMENTATION OF LEVEL 4 WATER RESTRICTIONS

CIA |87/15/1-02 | #7851093

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council notes the report and actions taken to implement level 4 water restrictions between 15 and 21 March 2026.

INTERESTED PARTIES:

NIL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report relates to the emergency implementation of Level 4 Water Restrictions on 15 March 2026 by the Chief Executive Officer after consultation with the Director Cairns Infrastructure and Assets.

On 15 March 2026 level 4 water restrictions were implemented in response to extremely high turbidity levels in the Freshwater Creek catchment, caused by the intense rainfall, forced the Freshwater Treatment Plant offline at about 1am. As reported previously to Council the combination of wet weather and reduced water capacity was an ongoing challenge. Council's Brinsmead and Bayview reservoirs are currently offline, while the University reservoir is operating at reduced capacity. The Cairns Region LDMG issued advise on 15 March 2026 to monitor conditions for severe weather and flooding. The combination of these risk factors led to the recommendation to implement level 4 water restrictions as the most effective mechanism to preserve stored water for essential use.

On 21 March 2026, water treatment operations and reservoir storage levels had stabilised, weather forecasts indicated a reduced threat to water treatment capability, and level 4 water restrictions were lifted.

BACKGROUND:

The implementation of Level 4 Water Restrictions on 15 March 2026 was undertaken in accordance with Cairns Regional Council Water Restrictions Policy and the statutory requirements of the Water Supply (Safety and Reliability) Act 2008.

Under the Act:

- Water service providers must ensure the continuity and safety of water supply during drought or emergency conditions.
- Section 141 and related provisions empower Council, through its delegated authority, to impose water restrictions to protect public health and maintain essential services.

In line with these obligations:

- Level 4 restrictions were triggered due to critical water security risks caused by high turbidity in Freshwater Creek and the shutdown of the Freshwater Treatment Plant.
- Restrictions limit water use to essential purposes only—drinking, cooking, and hygiene—while prohibiting non-essential uses such as garden watering, vehicle washing, and pool filling.
- Emergency implementation was authorised by the Chief Executive Officer under the provisions of the Act and Council's Water Restrictions Policy.

These measures ensure compliance with State legislation, safeguard community health, and uphold Council's statutory responsibility to manage water supply reliability during adverse conditions.

Authorising provisions within the drought management plan and the water restrictions policy allow emergency action to be taken by the Chief Executive Officer and a report provided to Council at the next available meeting.

Previously approved authority (28 January 2026 #7798735) to the CEO to impose restrictions in emergency situations were triggered.

The CEO of Cairns Regional Council imposed water restrictions in accordance with the Cairns Water Restrictions Policy and the provisions of the Water Supply (Safety and Reliability) Act 2008 upon advice from the Director Cairns Infrastructure and Assets. In accordance with these conditions a report on actions taken has been provided for the next scheduled Cairns Regional Council meeting.

COMMENT:

Wednesday 4 March the Bureau of Meteorology advised a tropical low (29U) was approaching the northeast Queensland Coast. Cairns Region Local Disaster Management Group issued a severe weather watch and act on Sunday 15 March 2026. TC Narelle (34U) formed on 17 March and crossed the coast at Coen as Category 4 bringing locally intense rainfall.

Council implemented Level 4 Water Restrictions by way of public communications Media Release from 15 March 2026 at 8.34AM, in response to the heightened water supply continuity risk from an ongoing heavy rainfall weather event.

Copperlode Dam catchment had received 260mm in the preceding 48 hours, increasing turbidity in the source water at Crystal Cascades and Behana Creek intakes. Turbidity was further exacerbated at Crystal Cascades intake due to the dam reaching 100% capacity and commencing to spill from 11 March 2026. High turbidity in the source water resulted in both Behana WTP and Freshwater Creek WTP being offline from approximately 1AM 15 March 2026. Intake blockages also occurred, increasing the likelihood of potential extended delays in returning to normal operation.

The Reservoir Emergent Works Program continues to be a key operational focus for Cairns Regional Council, ensuring the safe return of essential water assets and protecting the integrity of the broader network.

With the ongoing reservoir emergent works, water treatment operations impacted, increased consumption and tropical low approaching, there was a clear significant increase risk to the delivery of water services to the community. The increased risk position necessitated the decision to impose level 4 water restrictions to preserve water supplies.

OPTIONS:

Option 1

That Council notes the report and actions taken to implement level 4 water restrictions between 15 and 21 March 2026.

Or

Option 2

That Council requires further information.

CONSIDERATIONS:

Risk Management:

Reputational risk – failure to meet customer service standards.

Legislative - Public Health Act breach.

Asset Structural failure – Structural defects causing capacity loss and contamination risk.

Extensive potable water reservoir network supports water security, reservoir emergent works program continues to be the key operational focus. As water supply levels in reservoir drops in response to increases in consumption and decreases in production capacity will result in water restrictions being imposed.

These risks are managed through Cairns Water Security Steering Committee updates and open communication with the community.

Council Finance and the Local Economy:

Strategic Communications & Engagement to support level 4 water restrictions advertising and restriction implementation - has existing budget and includes TV, radio, press and social media.

Community and Cultural Heritage:

The expectations and awareness of the general public have matured considerably since the introduction of permanent water conservation measures and regular community engagement activities.

To ensure that customer segments are not disproportionately impacted, the Director of Cairns Infrastructure & Assets as delegate of the Chief Executive Officer may grant exemptions to water restrictions upon application from water users based on the following grounds:

1. For reasons of public health and safety
2. Any other criteria deemed appropriate under the water supply conditions at the time.

Natural Environment:

Implementation of level 4 restrictions should have no impact on the natural environment. Council has a legal obligation to maintain environmental flows under relevant water licences and this does not change with the introduction of water restrictions.

Corporate and Operational Plans:

Natural Assets
Water Security Strategy
Water Demand Management Strategy.

Statutory:

Water service providers are obligated to meet State Government imposed legislative requirements for water extraction, contained within our water licences and within sections of the *Water Act 2000*.

Water service providers are also required to meet legislative requirements within the *Water Supply (Safety and Reliability) Act 2008* pertaining to Drought Management and Quality and Safety of drinking water supplies (division 6). This includes adhering to Cairns Regional Council's endorsed Drought Response Plan and Drinking Water Quality Management Plans.

Policy:

General Policy - Water Restrictions Policy (DM #274566v9)

CONSULTATION:

Ongoing community awareness on the status of Cairns Water network and the rectification works continues to occur since October and community information has been published regarding emergency works.

ATTACHMENTS:

- Attachment A: Level 4 Water Restrictions (DM#6427689).
- Attachment B: CRC Media release Residents advised water supply disruptions 15 March 2026 CRC Website [15 March 2026](#)
- Attachment C: CRC Media release Residents update [16 March 2026](#)
- Attachment D: AWS Severe Weather Advise Monitor Conditions 15 March 2026 (DM#7841457)



Catherine Horne
Executive Manager Business Performance & Compliance



Toni Veronese
Associate Director Service Delivery



Mark Wuth
Director Cairns Infrastructure and Assets

Attachment A: Level 4 Water Restrictions

WATER RESTRICTIONS



LEVEL 4 Water Restrictions

Private gardens - watering	Sprinklers, micro spray and drip systems must not be used at any time. Hoses must not be used at any time. Watering cans or buckets filled directly from taps can be used between the hours of 7.00am to 8.00am and 7.00pm to 8.00pm.
Public parks and gardens and road reserves - watering Other than Parks and Gardens of significance or Heritage Gardens as determined by Council	Watering is prohibited at all times.
Private gardens and public gardens - filling or topping up of ponds	Existing ponds sustaining fish or bird life can only be topped up to their normal level and only by means of watering cans or buckets filled directly from taps. Other ponds must not be topped up or filled.
Fountains	Fountains must not operate without the permission of the Authority.
Paved areas - cleaning	Water must not be used to clean paved areas unless cleaning is required as a result of an accident, fire, health hazard or other emergency.
Private swimming pools or spas - filling or topping up	Newly constructed swimming pools and spas must not be filled. Existing swimming pools and spas must not be topped up or filled.
Farm dams and tanks - topping up	Farm dams and tanks must not be topped up except - Dams or tanks providing water for fire fighting public health or stock watering purposes but only to the extent necessary to reasonably provide for those purposes; or In the case of other dams or tanks, with the written permission of the Authority.
Sports grounds - watering	Non-active playing surfaces must not be watered. Active playing surfaces must not be watered except with hand held hoses on surfaces to be used for a scheduled Regional or State professional sporting competition; With hand held hoses; or With watering cans or buckets filled directly from taps.
Commercial market garden or plant nursery - watering of plants	Sprinklers must not be used without the written permission of authority. Hand held hoses, watering cans or buckets can be used at any time.
Window cleaning	Water must not be used to clean windows. <u>Exemption from Restrictions</u> The restrictions on the use of water for cleaning windows do not apply where cleaning is required as a result of an accident, fire, health hazard or other emergency.
Mobile water tankers - filling	Mobile water tankers must not be filled except - Between the hours of 8.00 a.m. and 8.00 p.m. with the written permission of the Authority; or Tankers supplying water for use inside domestic premises, or for fire fighting or stock watering purposes.
Motor vehicle dealers' vehicles - cleaning	Water must not be used to clean vehicles except by means of - (a) Commercial car washing facilities that recycle water (b) Watering cans or buckets filled directly from taps
Food transport vehicles - cleaning	Water must not be used to clean vehicles except by means of - (a) Automatic washing systems which recycle water; or (b) Watering cans or buckets filled directly from taps.
Other vehicles (cars, trucks, boats, jet skis) - cleaning	Water must not be used to clean vehicles unless cleaning is required for health or safety reasons. Cleaning for health and safety reasons must be undertaken using - Water must not be used to clean vehicles except by means of - (a) Automatic washing systems which recycle water; or (b) Commercial car wash facilities using trigger hoses or; (c) Watering cans or buckets filled directly from taps; or (d) Trigger hoses, which can be used only to rinse vehicles after washing, (e) Boat motors may be flushed and rinsed after use for a maximum 5 mins.
Construction industry - use of water in	Unless otherwise exempted by the Authority in writing, hoses must not be used except trigger hoses. Water must not be used for dust suppression unless the water is recycled water of the appropriate quality for the purpose.
Any purpose not included in any other items of this column other than for use inside domestic premises and for domestic and farm animals	Water must not be used without the written permission of the Authority.
New Lawns, Residential	New lawns can be watered on the day of installation for a period of one hour at any time with sprinkler with timer shut off. On any day between the hours of 6am and 8am and 6pm and 8pm for a period of 14 days after the installation date (receipt of installation required), by sprinkler with timer shut off. After 14 days from the day of establishment all level 1 water restrictions apply including watering times - • Odd numbered properties - between 6am and 8am and 6pm and 8pm, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays • Even numbered properties between 6am and 8am and 6pm and 8pm Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. Hand held hoses fitted with a trigger nozzle can be used at any time.

Failure to comply with Water Restrictions may incur penalties as described in s43 (5) of the Water Supply (Safety and Reliability) Act 2008.

Attachment B: CRC Media release Residents advised water supply disruptions 15 March 2026 CRC Website [15 March 2026](#)

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Level 4 water restrictions to apply immediately



Published: 15th March 2026. (Note: information was correct at date of publication but may have since been changed or superseded.)

Cairns Regional Council has declared [level 4 water restrictions](#) (PDF, 0.67 MB)with heavy overnight rainfall causing water treatment operations to be paused.

Level 4 restrict limits water usage for health and hygiene only - drinking, cooking and bathing.

High turbidity in Freshwater Creek catchment caused by heavy rain forced the Freshwater Treatment Plants offline about 1am this morning, leaving the region dependent on water stored in reservoirs.

The level 4 restrictions will reduce drawdown from the reservoirs to extend the availability of potable water.

With heavy rainfall expected to continue over the coming days and continued high turbidity in the system, it is unknown when treatment will recommence.

In addition to level 4 restrictions, the community can further help by limiting shower times and collecting rainwater for flushing toilets. Every extra bit of water saving counts.

Water restrictions will be reassessed once water treatment is reestablished, and supply is stabilised.

[More information on level 4 water restrictions](#) (PDF, 0.67 MB).

Last Updated: 17 March 2026

Attachment C: CRC Media release Residents update [16 March 2026](#)

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Level 4 restrictions remain in place

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Published: 16th March 2026. (Note: information was correct at date of publication but may have since been changed or superseded.)

Issued: 4pm Monday 16 March

Next update: 4pm Wednesday 18 March or as the situation changes

Cairns Regional Council continues to apply [level 4 water restrictions](#) to reduce reservoir drawdown and replenish potable water supplies.

Level 4 restrict limits water usage for health and hygiene only - drinking, cooking and bathing.


Limiting water consumption to essential purposes will allow us to return reservoirs more quickly to maximum storage capacity. This is important ahead of any further heavy rainfalls that may interrupt our water treatment operations.

In addition to level 4 restrictions, the community can further help by limiting shower times and collecting rainwater for flushing toilets. Every extra bit of water saving counts.

Water restrictions will be reassessed once water treatment is reestablished, and supply is stabilised.

[More information on level 4 water restrictions.](#)

Last Updated: 16 March 2026



ADVICE
Monitor Conditions
Cairns Region
Severe Weather: Thunderstorms and Flooding

Issued: 10am, Sunday 15th March 2026
Next Update: 10am, Monday 16 March 2026 or as the situation changes

The Cairns Region Local Disaster Management Group advises people in the Cairns Regional Local Government Area:

- To Monitor conditions for severe thunderstorms and flooding

Bureau of Meteorology continues Warnings for Minor Flooding for the Barron, Mulgrave and Russell River catchments and continues for Severe Thunderstorm warning for Heavy Rainfall across the Cairns Region

Cairns Regional Council has initiated level 4 water restrictions. Conserve water. Fill up containers and the bath with clean water for drinking in case the water supply is cut off.

Current Conditions

- Mulgrave and Russell rivers are at Minor flood levels
- Minor Flood Warning for Barron River (Kamerunga Bridge, expected early Sunday afternoon)
- Heavy rain across the region has caused flash flooding to low lying roads and bridges

Safety Advice

- Do not drive, walk, swim, or play in floodwaters — it is dangerous.
- If living near water ways, preparing your home for risk of surface water inundation.
- Exercise caution and drive to the conditions. If its flooded – Forget it!
- Check or make an emergency kit. Find out how to get ready and pack an emergency kit at the [Get Ready Queensland website \(Get Prepared\)](#)
- Share this information with friends, family and neighbours.

For More Information

- Follow the Cairns Local Disaster Dashboard: www.disaster.cairns.qld.gov.au
- Listen to **ABC Far North on 801 AM, 95.5 FM, or 106.7 FM**
- For power outage information, visit: ergon.com.au/network
- Check the latest weather warnings, rainfall, and river levels at the **Bureau of Meteorology Queensland website**.
- Check road closures at the **QLD Traffic website** or phone **13 19 40**.
- Check public transport disruptions at the [Translink website](#).

Emergency Assistance

- In a life-threatening emergency, call **000 (Triple Zero)** immediately.
- For SES assistance, call **132 500**.