

RAB-based irrigation prices 2027-29: draft report

Mareeba-Dimbulah water supply scheme

July 2026

What this review is about

We were directed to investigate and report on irrigation prices for 2027-28 and 2028-29 under the regulatory asset base approach.¹ This review is an interim step before the next full price review.

Our draft report compares two approaches to recovering renewals expenditure:

- **Renewals annuity approach** – recovers renewals costs through a smoothed allowance based on forecast expenditure over the long-term
- **Regulatory asset base (RAB) approach** – generally recovers renewals costs from when they are incurred, with capital expenditure added to the RAB.

This information sheet summarises our draft findings for the Mareeba-Dimbulah water supply scheme (WSS) and distribution system.

Our draft report, covering Sunwater's schemes, is available on our [website](#) with further detail.²

Relative merits of the approaches

Stakeholders have expressed a range of views, particularly on price stability and long-term price outcomes under a RAB approach. These views have informed our assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, as well as the design of transition arrangements.

The RAB approach aligns prices more closely with actual efficient expenditure, strengthening incentives for cost control and investment delivery. By linking revenue to delivered works, it improves risk allocation – placing financing and delivery risk with the business while reducing customers' exposure to forecast risk.

The annuity approach may spread costs more evenly across customer cohorts, particularly where long-term forecasts are stable. In contrast, the RAB approach aligns cost recovery with the timing and service life of assets, which supports intergenerational equity but potentially results in more variable prices when expenditure is lumpy.

Neither approach has a clear advantage in long-term price stability. Annuity-based prices are more affected by changes in long-term renewals forecasts, while RAB-based prices are more impacted by large or lumpy projects.

The approaches also differ in transparency. The annuity approach provides visibility of planned expenditure and forward price paths, while the RAB approach offers a clearer audit trail linking delivered works, the asset base and future revenue.

See Chapter 2 of the draft report for our assessment of the relative merits of each approach.

¹ The direction notice is available on our [website](#).

² A separate draft report covers Seqwater's schemes.

Draft price targets and prices for 2027-28 and 2028-29

RAB-based prices are lower in the next two years, as costs are recovered later (Table 1).

Table 1: Draft price targets and prices, by tariff group (\$/ML, nominal)

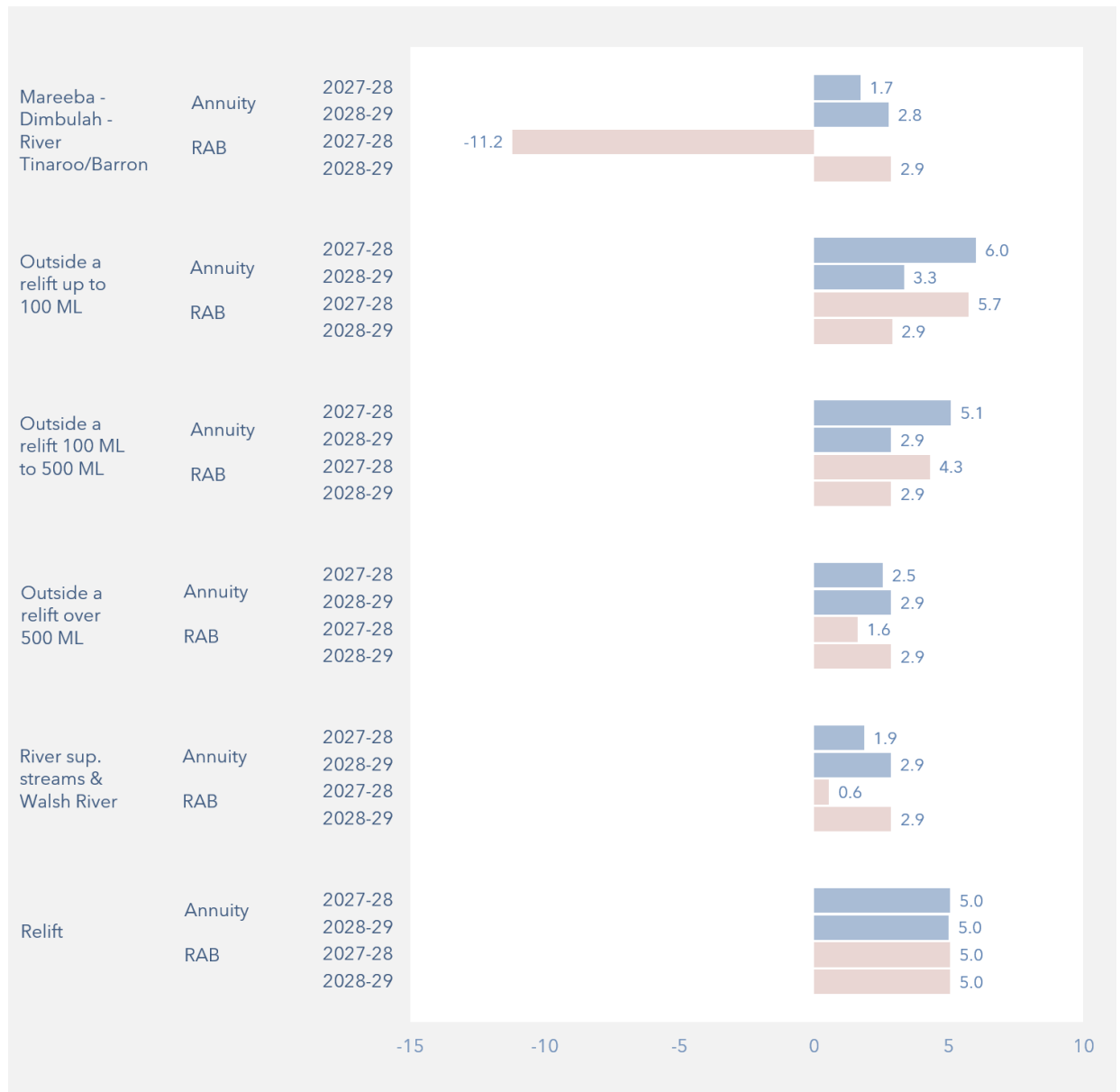
Tariff group	Component	Annuity approach		RAB approach	
		2027-28	2028-29	2027-28	2028-29
Mareeba-Dimbulah River Tinaroo/ Barron	Price targets				
	Part A	3.31	3.40	2.84	2.92
	Part B	0.63	0.65	0.63	0.65
	Draft prices (transitional)				
	Part A	3.31	3.40	2.84	2.92
	Part B	0.63	0.65	0.63	0.65
Outside a relift up to 100 ML	Price targets				
	Total fixed	76.53	78.72	75.97	78.15
	Total volumetric	9.13	9.39	9.13	9.39
	Draft prices (transitional)				
	Total fixed	76.53	78.72	75.97	78.15
	Total volumetric	8.53	9.39	9.09	9.39
Outside a relift 100 ML to 500 ML	Price targets				
	Total fixed	67.88	69.82	67.33	69.26
	Total volumetric	9.13	9.39	9.13	9.39
	Draft prices (transitional)				
	Total fixed	67.88	69.82	67.33	69.26
	Total volumetric	9.13	9.39	9.13	9.39
Outside a relift over 500 ML	Price targets				
	Total fixed	53.45	54.98	52.91	54.43
	Total volumetric	9.13	9.39	9.13	9.39
	Draft prices (transitional)				
	Total fixed	53.45	54.98	52.91	54.43
	Total volumetric	9.13	9.39	9.13	9.39
River sup. streams & Walsh River	Price targets				
	Total fixed	37.10	38.16	36.58	37.63
	Total volumetric	5.73	5.89	5.73	5.89
	Draft prices (transitional)				
	Total fixed	37.10	38.16	36.58	37.63
	Total volumetric	5.73	5.89	5.73	5.89
Relift	Price targets				
	Total fixed	79.28	81.55	78.74	81.00
	Total volumetric	101.31	104.22	101.31	104.22
	Draft prices (transitional)				
	Total fixed	70.26	75.12	70.26	75.12
	Total volumetric	101.31	104.22	101.31	104.22

Note: Price targets reflect cost-reflective prices. Draft prices are transitional and move towards these targets over time. Total fixed is equal to Part A + Part C and total volumetric is equal to Part B + Part D. All bulk and distribution system customers pay an access charge of \$818.08 in 2027-28 and \$841.56 in 2028-29.

Price movements differ by tariff group over the next two years (Figure 1) and show:

- for the river tariff group, moderate increases under the annuity approach (around 2-3%) and more variability under the RAB approach (around -11% to 3%)
- for the outside a relift channel tariff groups, moderate increases under both approaches (around 2-5% under the annuity approach and 1-5% under the RAB approach)
- for the relift channel tariff group, consistent increases of about 5% under both approaches
- for the supplemented streams tariff group, moderate increases of around 1-3% under both approaches.

Figure 1: Annual changes in prices by tariff group, from 2027-28 to 2028-29 (% change)



Note: The figure uses the total price per megalitre of water access entitlement (WAE) for each tariff group, which is based on assumed scheme usage from the 2025 review. Individual customer impacts will depend on actual water use. The price changes for distribution system tariff groups do not reflect the impact of the rebate.

See Chapter 6 of the draft report for more information about price impacts

Key inputs to the RAB approach

Applying a RAB approach requires:

- the appropriate categorisation of expenditure between capital expenditure (capex) and operating expenditure (opex)
- reliable data on asset lives
- an initial RAB for both the Mareeba-Dimbulah WSS and distribution system.

Expense categorisation

We have used Sunwater's proposed categorisation of renewals expenditure for this interim review, having regard to the constrained timeframe and practical limitations of undertaking a detailed project-level reassessment. If a RAB approach is adopted, a more detailed assessment of renewals classification will be required at the next full price review.

Asset lives

We have used Sunwater's proposed asset lives for forecast renewals expenditure for this interim review. These asset life assumptions should be treated as interim and will require further validation before the next full price review.

Initial RAB

Consistent with Sunwater's proposed approach, we have set the initial RAB for the bulk scheme at 1 July 2027 based on the closing negative annuity balances at 30 June 2027. For the bulk scheme, this balance is \$1.3 million. This negative balance has been mainly driven by actual expenditure significantly exceeding forecasts over the 2012-20 and 2020-25 price path periods.

Consistent with Sunwater's proposed approach, we have set the initial RAB for the distribution system at 1 July 2027 to zero, as it has a positive annuity balance at 30 June 2027.

See Chapter 4 of the draft report for more information about key inputs to the RAB approach.

Managing the transition

Using these inputs, we have assessed how the transition from the annuity approach to the RAB approach affects the cost-reflective fixed price targets for this scheme, noting that volumetric price targets will be unchanged.

For the bulk scheme, we have applied a 10-year depreciation period to the initial RAB. This period has been selected to limit the difference between RAB-based and annuity-based fixed price targets in the first year of transition (2027-28). This provides a practical basis for moderating price target changes at the point of transition and reduces the divergence in subsequent price path periods.

For the distribution system, we have proposed that positive annuity balances be returned to customers through a rebate, consistent with Sunwater's approach. While Sunwater proposed returning these balances as rebates over either a 4-year or 8-year period, we have adopted the shorter period.

Under this approach, the total rebate to be returned at 1 July 2027 would be equal to the positive annuity balance at 30 June 2027. For distribution system, this balance is forecast to be \$13.7 million.

This positive annuity balance reflects the extent to which renewals expenditure has been over-recovered under the annuity approach since 1 July 2000. This positive balance has been mainly driven by actual expenditure being significantly lower than forecast over the 2012–20 price path period, combined with relatively higher renewals forecasts beyond the price path period in both the 2012 and 2020 reviews.

RAB-based fixed price targets are lower than annuity-based price targets in the first two years of transition (Table 2).

Table 2: Fixed price target impacts under the proposed transition setting (\$/ML)

Tariff group	Metric	2027-28	2028-29	2053-54
Mareeba-Dimbulah – River Tinaroo/Barron	Fixed price target – annuity	3.31	3.40	4.78
	Fixed price target – RAB	2.84	2.92	4.77
	Difference (%)	(14.2)	(14.1)	(0.2)
Outside a relift up to 100 ML	Fixed price target – annuity	76.53	78.72	147.74
	Fixed price target – RAB	75.97	78.15	159.04
	Difference (%)	(0.7)	(0.7)	7.6
Outside a relift 100 ML to 500 ML	Fixed price target – annuity	67.88	69.82	130.84
	Fixed price target – RAB	67.33	69.26	140.81
	Difference (%)	(0.8)	(0.8)	7.6
Outside a relift over 500 ML	Fixed price target – annuity	53.45	54.98	102.67
	Fixed price target – RAB	52.91	54.43	110.40
	Difference (%)	(1.0)	(1.0)	7.5
River – sup. streams & Walsh River	Fixed price target – annuity	37.10	38.16	70.74
	Fixed price target – RAB	36.58	37.63	75.95
	Difference (%)	(1.4)	(1.4)	7.4
Relift	Fixed price target – annuity	79.28	81.55	152.29
	Fixed price target – RAB	78.74	81.00	160.97
	Difference (%)	(0.7)	(0.7)	5.7

Note: The price targets and differences for distribution system tariff groups do not reflect the impact of the rebate.

See Chapter 4 of the draft report for our approach to managing transitional impacts.

Longer-term price implications

We have assessed how price targets and prices change over the longer term under the RAB approach compared with the annuity approach. These forecasts should be interpreted with caution, given the significant uncertainty associated with projections this far into the future.

For the annuity approach, this modelling assumes a rolling renewals annuity, with forecast renewals beyond Sunwater's planning period based on average historical levels.

Over the long-term, RAB-based prices are broadly aligned with annuity prices. Figures 2 to 7 compare annuity-based and RAB-based price targets and prices over the next two years, and in the first year of each subsequent price path period to 2053–54.

Figure 2: Fixed price targets and prices – Mareeba-Dimbulah – river – Tinaroo/Barron (\$/ML)

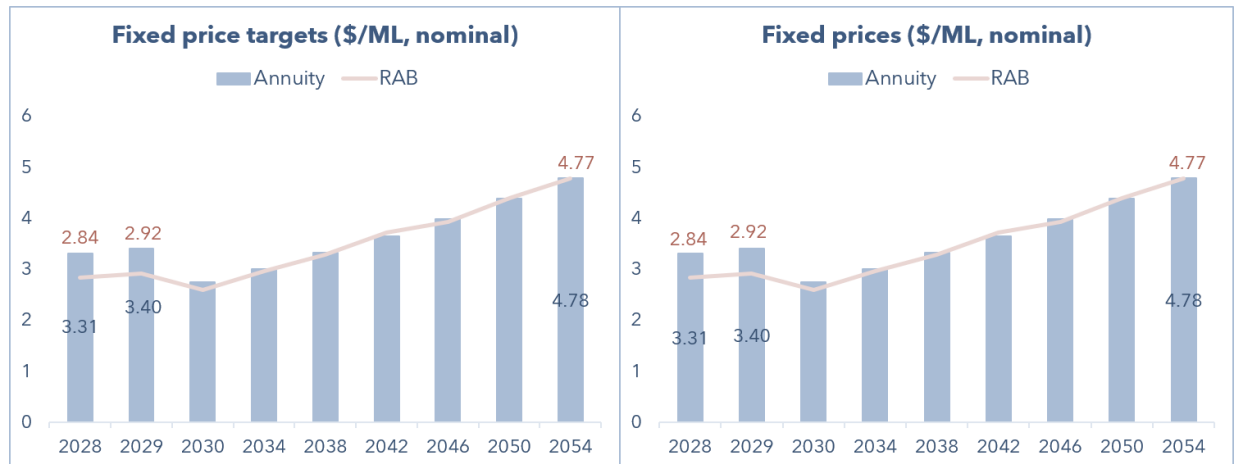


Figure 3: Fixed price targets and prices – Mareeba-Dimbulah – outside a relift up to 100 ML (\$/ML)

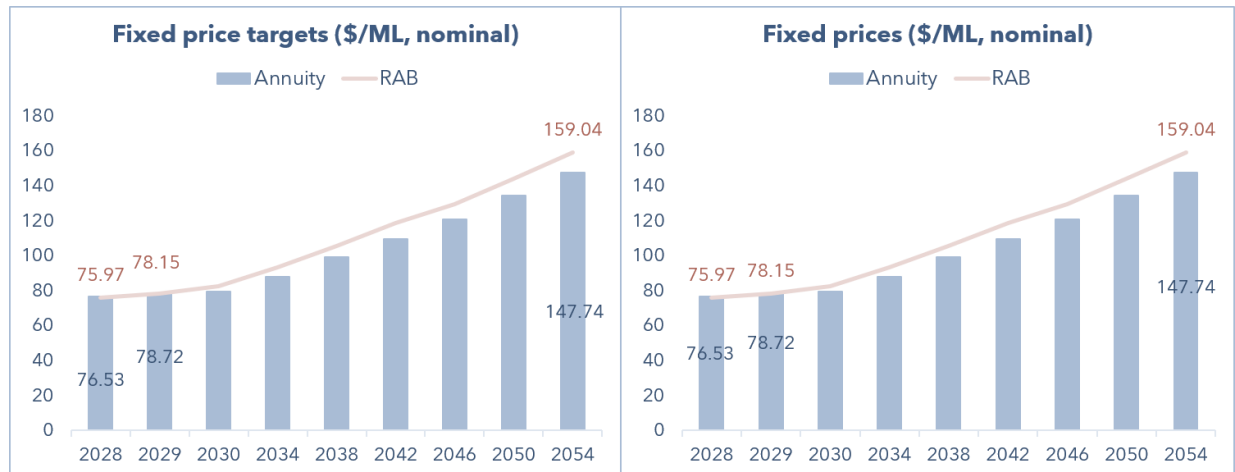


Figure 4: Fixed price targets and prices – Mareeba-Dimbulah – outside a relift 100 ML to 500 ML (\$/ML)

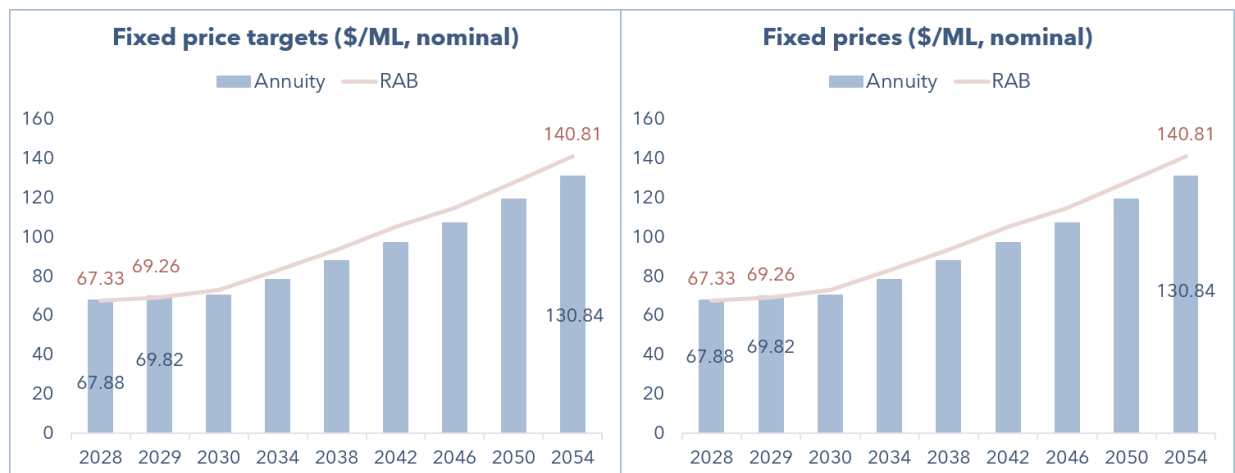


Figure 5: Fixed price targets and prices – Mareeba-Dimbulah – outside a relift over 500 ML (\$/ML)

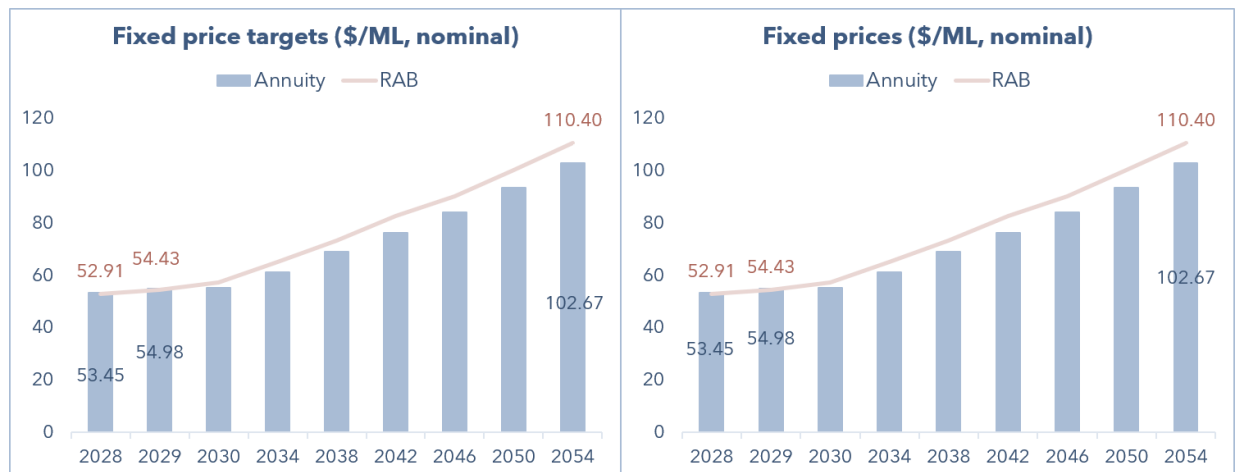


Figure 6: Fixed price targets and prices – Mareeba-Dimbulah – river – supplemented streams & Walsh River (\$/ML)

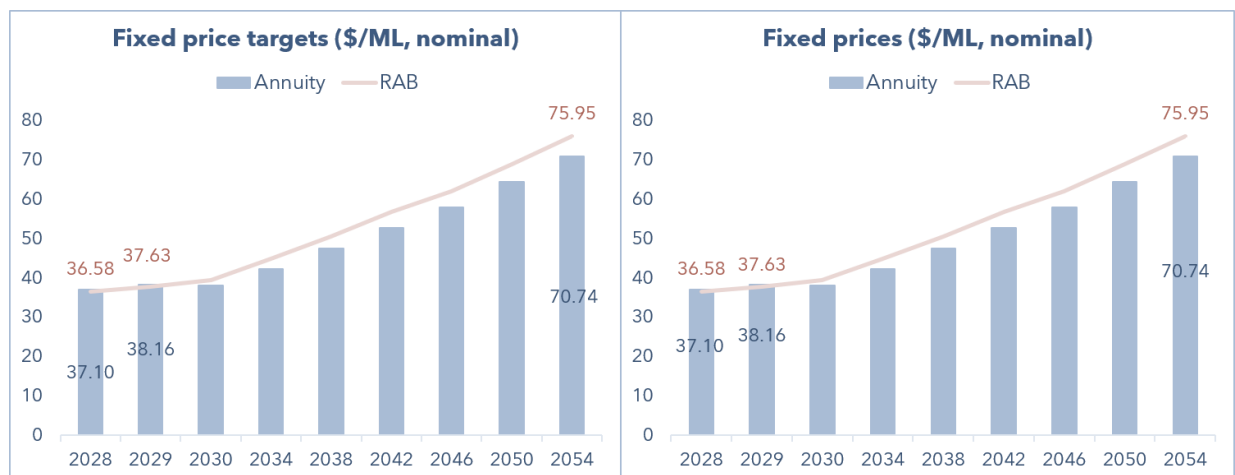
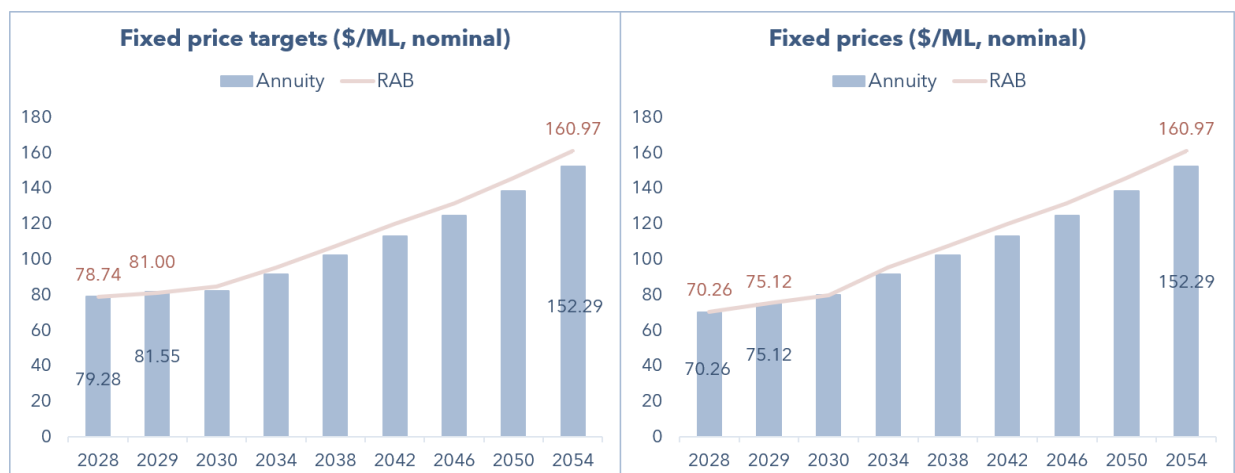


Figure 7: Fixed price targets and prices – Mareeba-Dimbulah – relift (\$/ML)



By 2053-54, the closing annuity balance is forecast to be a deficit of \$3.5 million for the bulk scheme and a surplus of \$16.5 million for the distribution system, while the closing RAB balance is forecast

to be \$7.7 million for the bulk scheme and \$16.2 million for the distribution system. The following section outlines how the RAB rolls forward over the price path period.

RAB roll-forward for Mareeba-Dimbulah WSS and distribution system

The RAB is used to calculate the renewals allowance included in price targets under the RAB approach. It increases when renewals capex is added and decreases as assets are depreciated. The return on capital and depreciation are recovered through fixed price targets (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: Mareeba-Dimbulah WSS, RAB roll-forward (\$'000, nominal)

	2027-28	2028-29
Opening balance	1,307.9	3,501.8
Renewals capex	2,319.8	422.7
Inflation adjustment	70.6	106.5
Depreciation	(196.5)	(277.1)
Closing balance	3,501.8	3,754.0

Note: Numbers may not add due to rounding.

Table 4: Mareeba-Dimbulah distribution system, RAB roll-forward (\$'000, nominal)

	2027-28	2028-29
Opening balance	0.0	2,264.5
Renewals capex	2,296.5	1,287.8
Inflation adjustment	32.7	83.3
Depreciation	(64.7)	(176.7)
Closing balance	2,264.5	3,459.0

Note: Numbers may not add due to rounding.

More information about costs is provided in Chapter 5 of the draft report.

Next steps

Our draft recommendations are indicative and will be subject to further consideration before we provide our final report.

We will hold workshops on our draft report in July 2026. Information about the workshops is available on our website.

We appreciate the valuable contribution that stakeholders have made to our review so far. We welcome further feedback and comments on our draft report, which will assist us with the finalisation of our recommendations to the government.

Stakeholders are invited to provide written submissions on our draft report by 7 August 2026. We will consider all submissions received by the due date in preparing our final report, which is due to the government by 30 September 2026.