

Why are we recommending irrigation prices?

The Queensland Government directed us to recommend irrigation prices for Sunwater and Seqwater customers over the pricing period 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2024.

This includes recommending prices for irrigation customers in the **Mareeba-Dimbulah water supply scheme (WSS)** and **distribution system**. Prices for non-irrigation customers are outside the scope of our review.

After extensive consultation with irrigators, we have released our final report. The Government will make the final decision on irrigation prices, taking our recommendations into consideration.

How we have recommended prices

We recommended two-part tariffs for the tariff groups in this scheme. The first part (Part A and Part C) is a *fixed price* per megalitre (ML) of water access entitlement (WAE), and the second part (Part B and Part D) is a *volumetric price* per ML of water used.

The volumetric price recovers variable costs (e.g. a portion of labour costs, and electricity costs relating to pumping) that change with water usage. The remaining costs are recovered by the fixed price. We assessed all expenditure to ensure that Sunwater only recovers prudent and efficient costs.

We applied the pricing principles in the referral, as these give effect to the Government's water pricing policy. Under that policy, prices are to gradually transition over time to the 'lower bound cost target'. This target recovers the irrigation share of the scheme's operating, maintenance and capital renewal costs but does not recover a return on, or of, the scheme's existing asset base (as at 1 July 2000). We also moderated bill impacts by capping total price increases to inflation plus \$2.38/ML of WAE (from 2020–21, increasing by inflation). More details are in Part A (chapter 2) of our report.

Under our recommended prices, cost recovery for Sunwater's irrigation customers will improve from 90% in 2020–21 to 94% by 2023–24. The shortfall is currently funded by a subsidy, paid by the Queensland taxpayer, which will reduce over time as prices transition to the lower bound cost target.

What prices have we recommended?

For river-only customers in the Mareeba-Dimbulah WSS, our recommendations result in the fixed price remaining constant over the price path period. The volumetric price increases by inflation over the price path period. Prices fully recover costs.

For the distribution system tariff groups (excluding the Relift tariff group), our recommendations result in the total fixed prices increasing by our estimate of inflation (2.24%) plus \$2.38/ML (2020–21 dollars) until the prices reach cost-reflective levels in 2021–22. Total volumetric prices decrease to the cost-reflective level immediately. Prices fully recover costs by the end of the pricing period.

For the Relift tariff group, our recommendations result in the total fixed price increasing by our estimate of inflation (2.24%) plus \$2.38/ML (2020–21 dollars) over the price path period. Total volumetric prices increase by inflation over the price path period. Prices will not recover costs by the end of the pricing period. Cost recovery will increase from 89% in 2020–21 to 95% by 2023–24.

Our recommendations for this scheme's access charge result in it increasing annually by our estimate of inflation (2.24%) over the pricing period.

Recommended prices for irrigation customers—\$/ML

Tariff group	2019–20 (Current)	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Mareeba-Dimbulah WSS					
Fixed (Part A)	15.87	15.87	15.87	15.87	15.87
Volumetric (Part B)	0.59	0.60	0.62	0.63	0.64
Distribution system—Outside a relift up to 100 ML					
Fixed (Part A)	3.45	5.52	5.64	5.77	5.90
Volumetric (Part B)	0.59	0.64	0.65	0.67	0.68
Fixed (Part C)	51.82	53.37	54.91	56.25	57.63
Volumetric (Part D)	8.27	5.90	6.04	6.17	6.31
Total Fixed	55.27	58.89	60.55	62.02	63.53
Total Volumetric	8.86	6.54	6.69	6.84	6.99
Distribution system—Outside a relift 100 ML to 500 ML					
Fixed (Part A)	3.45	5.52	5.64	5.77	5.90
Volumetric (Part B)	0.59	0.64	0.65	0.67	0.68
Fixed (Part C)	45.27	46.67	48.40	49.60	50.82
Volumetric (Part D)	8.27	5.90	6.04	6.17	6.31
Total Fixed	48.72	52.19	54.04	55.37	56.72
Total Volumetric	8.86	6.54	6.69	6.84	6.99

Distribution system—Outside a relift over 500 ML					
Fixed (Part A)	3.45	5.52	5.64	5.77	5.90
Volumetric (Part B)	0.59	0.64	0.65	0.67	0.68
Fixed (Part C)	34.33	35.49	37.52	38.48	39.46
Volumetric (Part D)	8.27	5.90	6.04	6.17	6.31
Total Fixed	37.78	41.01	43.16	44.25	45.36
Total Volumetric	8.86	6.54	6.69	6.84	6.99
Distribution system—River supplementary Streams & Walsh River					
Fixed (Part A)	3.45	5.52	5.64	5.77	5.90
Volumetric (Part B)	0.59	0.64	0.65	0.67	0.68
Fixed (Part C)	23.40	24.31	25.99	26.57	27.16
Volumetric (Part D)	4.73	3.54	3.63	3.70	3.79
Total Fixed	26.85	29.83	31.63	32.34	33.06
Total Volumetric	5.32	4.18	4.28	4.37	4.47
Distribution system—Relift					
Fixed (Part A)	3.45	5.52	5.64	5.77	5.90
Volumetric (Part B)	0.59	0.60	0.62	0.63	0.64
Fixed (Part C)	39.33	40.60	43.94	47.41	51.02
Volumetric (Part D)	86.22	88.15	90.12	92.15	94.21
Total Fixed	42.78	46.12	49.58	53.18	56.92
Total Volumetric	86.81	88.75	90.74	92.78	94.85
Access charge					
\$ per customer	687.77	703.18	718.93	735.03	751.50

How we have addressed stakeholder concerns

Access charge

Some irrigation stakeholders were concerned about what costs the access charge includes, and price increases above inflation for the access charge.

Sunwater was not able to provide us with sufficiently disaggregated cost data to allow us to determine the quantum of costs that vary per customer. In the absence of updated costing information that would support a change from the current charge, combined with customer support for its retention, we recommended that this scheme's fixed access charge be maintained in real terms.

See Part B (section 6.4) of our report for further details.

Dam safety

Some irrigation stakeholders have raised concerns about the allocation of dam safety expenditure to irrigators.

The primary service provided by most dams that are within the scope of our review is the supply of water to users. In order to provide that service, the water business must comply with a range of regulatory obligations, including dam safety requirements. As a compliance cost, we consider that dam

safety upgrade expenditure should be treated as a normal cost of operation in supplying water services to customers.

We reflected the incidental flood moderation benefits of dams by only allocating 80% of irrigators' share of dam safety upgrade expenditure to the allowable cost base.

Where a dam has a formal flood mitigation role, we consider that the costs of dam safety upgrades should be shared with beneficiaries in the broader community.

See Part A (Chapter 4) of our report for further details.

Distribution losses

Some irrigation stakeholders were concerned about the level of distribution loss WAE allocated to irrigators.

We estimated the costs associated with historical excess distribution loss WAEs, and allocated the bulk holding (fixed) costs of these to Sunwater on the basis that distribution system customers should not pay for distribution loss WAEs in excess of what is required to meet actual loss releases.

More details are in Part B (section 6.2) of our report.

Electricity cost pass through mechanism

Some stakeholders expressed concern for Sunwater's proposed electricity cost pass through mechanism.

We are concerned that the automatic pass through of electricity costs has the potential for large bill impacts and reduced incentives for the efficient use of electricity.

We have encouraged Sunwater to further refine the proposal and demonstrate clear customer support. The Government may wish to consider any such agreement were one to be reached subsequent to our report.

More details are in Part A (section 3.3) of our report.

Operating costs

Some irrigation stakeholders in this scheme have raised concerns with costs incurred to implement the 2015 recommendations made by the Inspector-General Emergency Management (IGEM costs), electricity costs (Part B, section 2.3) and insurance costs (Part B, section 2.3).

We accepted Sunwater's revised (lower) IGEM costs provided to us in June 2019. However, we allocated this between irrigation and non-irrigation customers using the headworks utilisation factor. More details are in Part B (section 2.9) of our report.

We accepted Sunwater's June 2019 base year electricity cost estimates for bulk schemes as they are not materially different from our alternative estimates. However, we reduced electricity costs for distribution systems by 4.8%. See Part B (section 2.5) of our report for further details.

While we accepted Sunwater's final insurance costs for 2019–20 as a base year estimate, we also allocated these costs between irrigation and non-irrigation customers using the headworks utilisation factor. More details are in Part B (section 2.6) of our report.

Some irrigation stakeholders were also concerned with Sunwater's cost allocation methodology used to allocate non-direct costs.

We reviewed the cost allocation methodology and consider it appropriate. Non-direct costs are allocated based on the share of direct labour in a scheme because these costs mainly relate to staff time on head office and local support functions.

See Part B (section 2.8) of our report for further details.

Recreation costs

Some irrigation stakeholders raised concerns over the recovery of renewals expenditure relating to recreation services from irrigators.

We reviewed Sunwater's forecast renewals expenditure to ensure that expenditure relating to recreational services have been excluded. See Part B (section 3.4) of our report for further details.

Renewals annuity

Some irrigation stakeholders raised concerns about Sunwater's asset management practices and the prudence and efficiency of meter replacement costs.

We identified improvements to Sunwater's asset planning and management to ensure assets are not replaced earlier or later than required. See Part B (section 3.2) of our report for further details.

We reduced Sunwater's forecast renewals expenditure by 35.2% (relative to the November 2018 submission) to reflect our assessment of the prudent and efficient level of expenditure. See Part B (sections 3.4 and 3.5) of our report for further details.

Tariff structure

Some irrigation stakeholders were concerned about the future of the declining block tariff.

In the absence of updated information on Sunwater's cost of supply to the three different customer groups, we are unable to update the pricing differential that exists for the Part C charge in the channel outside a relift area. We note that the differential is widely supported through the Mareeba-Dimbulah distribution system and has been in place for an extended period of operation.

Further details are in Part A (section 3.2) and Part B (section 7.2) of our report.

QCA fee

Some stakeholders did not support the recovery of QCA regulatory fees through irrigation prices.

Our review is limited to pricing for irrigation customers in Sunwater and Seqwater irrigation schemes. As such, we consider that irrigation customers are the key beneficiaries of our regulatory service, and should be allocated the associated costs. We allocated regulatory fees based on water entitlements (ML) held by irrigation customers in each of the water supply schemes specified in the referral.

More details are in Part B (section 2.9) of our report.

Within price path review

Some irrigation stakeholders have raised concerns with our recommendation to address material cost risks using price reviews within the regulatory period.

We recommended that if there is a material decrease in costs associated with a specified review event during the price path period, this should be passed through to customers during the period so they have immediate relief. However we recommended that for a material cost increase – Sunwater would need to demonstrate that it is unable to manage the cost increase within the price path period to be eligible for a within period review.

Other matters raised by stakeholders

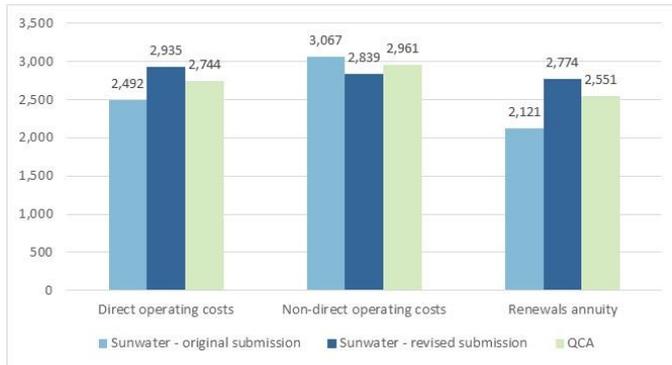
Some irrigation stakeholders in this scheme have raised concerns about price levels, affordability and the impact of higher water prices on their businesses, regional economies and local communities.

We consider that recommending prices that are consistent with the Government's pricing principles takes into account social welfare, capacity to pay and regional development considerations. We also moderated bill impacts. More details are in Part A (chapter 2) of our report.

We have recommended adjustments in bulk scheme costs for Mareeba-Dimbulah WSS and a reduction in distribution system costs

We have increased Sunwater's proposed bulk scheme costs by 8% over the pricing period 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2024.

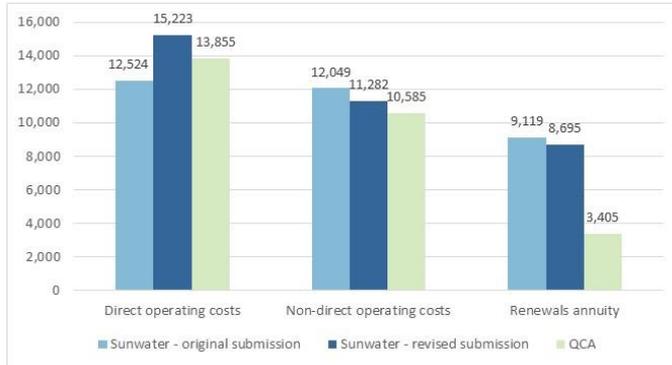
Total scheme costs over the price path period—Mareeba-Dimbulah WSS (2018–19 dollars) (\$'000)



Notes: 1. Revenue offsets are not included in the charts. 2. QCA Non-direct operating costs includes the QCA regulatory fees.

We reduced Sunwater’s proposed distribution scheme costs by 17% over the pricing period 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2024.

Total scheme costs over the price path period—Mareeba-Dimbulah distribution system (2018–19 dollars) (\$'000)



Notes: 1. Revenue offsets are not included in the charts. 2. QCA Non-direct operating costs includes the QCA regulatory fees.

More details on recommended costs for Sunwater schemes are in Part B (chapters 2 to 4) of our report.

We have assessed local impacts

We moderated bill impacts for distribution system tariff groups by limiting the increase in the combined fixed and volumetric price to inflation plus \$2.38/ML of WAE (from 2020–21, increasing by inflation). We have recommended that for the Relift tariff group, the fixed price increases by inflation plus \$2.38/ML (from 2020–21, increasing by inflation) over the price path period, and the existing 2019–20 volumetric price increases by inflation only.

The table below presents an estimate of the change in water bills (compared to the bill based on current prices), for various levels of water use.

More details on bill impacts are in Part B (chapters 7 and 9, and appendix C) of our report.

Change in water bill

Water use as portion of entitlement held (%)	Water bill change from 2019–20 to 2020–21 (%)	Water bill change from 2019–20 to 2023–24 (%)
Mareeba–Dimbulah WSS		
0	–	–
25	–	–
50	–	–
75	–	–
100	–	–
Outside a relief up to 100 ML		
0	7	15
25	5	14
50	4	12
75	3	11
100	2	10
Outside a relief 100 ML to 500 ML		
0	7	16
25	6	15
50	4	13
75	3	12
100	2	11
Outside a relief over 500 ML		
0	9	20
25	7	18
50	5	16
75	3	14
100	2	12
River supplementary Streams & Walsh River		
0	11	23
25	10	21
50	8	20
75	7	18
100	6	17
Relift		
0	8	33
25	6	25
50	5	21
75	4	19
100	4	17

Where you can find out more

The final report is on the [QCA website](#) in three parts:

- Part A—key regulatory and pricing framework issues that apply to both Sunwater and Seqwater
- Part B—Sunwater schemes
- Part C—Seqwater schemes.

What happens next?

The Government will consider our final report and make the final decision on irrigation water prices for Sunwater and Seqwater customers over the pricing period 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2024.