

The Western Division of New South Wales

The Western Division makes up 42% of the area of New South Wales. The vast majority of the Western Division is Crown land, administered under various Crown Lands Acts, in particular the *Western Lands Act 1901*, by the Crown Lands Division of the Department of Lands (Lands).

The Western Division lies west of a line from the Queensland border at Mungindi to Balranald near the Victorian border. It covers some 32.5 million hectares.

The boundaries are defined by borders with Queensland, South Australia and Victoria in the north, west and south respectively. The eastern boundary follows the Barwon River, Marra Creek, a line south to Euabalong and then the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers.

The vast majority of the land in the Division (about 31 million hectares) is under perpetual leasehold from the Crown with only a small area under freehold, along with land in national parks or forestry reservation.

Leasehold title is largely the result of the division's history of settlement and its semi-arid rangeland nature. European land settlement was largely for grazing, which remains the main land use today.

In recent decades there has been increased development of dryland and irrigated agriculture, particularly along rivers, in the County of Finch in the Division's north-east and along the eastern and southern margins.

The climate is characterised by high summer temperatures, low and erratic rainfall and evaporation rates that greatly exceed rainfall. Average annual rainfall varies between 450mm in the north-east to 150mm in the north-west corner.

Severe dry periods are an important feature of the climate and have a frequency of recurrence of about 1:8 to 1:10 years. Significant droughts have occurred in 1845, 1864, 1895-1905, 1911-17, 1928-30,

1940-46, 1965-67, 1978-mid 1980s, 1993-94 and most recently in 2001-2007. The vastness of the division is such that the impact of droughts is not uniformly felt across the region.

Native vegetation reflects the low and variable rainfall, soil type and topography. The rangeland types of western NSW are:

- Belah – Bluebush
- Bimble box-pine
- Downs Country
- Gidgee – Brigalow
- Mallee
- Mitchell Grass Plains
- Mulga
- Northern Floodplains
- Saltbush Plains
- Southern Grasslands
- Southern Riverine Woodlands.

Long-lived plant species dominate the rangelands providing stability to the system, while short-lived plants are an important basis for animal productivity. Grazing industries rely on natural landscapes and native vegetation except in small pockets where dryland or irrigated cropping is undertaken.

The 31 million hectares of leasehold country comprise:

- 4,753 rural leases (1,650 holdings)
- 1,423 residential leases
- 181 business leases.

In addition, there are:

- 155 other leases and holdings in lower Murray irrigation areas
- 887 licences for occupation of Crown land
- 190 licences for extraction of soil, rock, sand and gravel.

Property sizes vary from a few thousand hectares to 200,000 hectares. The bigger properties are in the far west, the smaller (5,000-6,000ha) around

Walgett, Wentworth and Balranald. The smaller properties are generally more intensively developed with cropping their main enterprise.

Irrigation is significant in the riverland areas adjacent to the Murray, Lachlan and Barwon-Darling rivers. Dryland cropping, even with its seasonal variability, can provide the majority of farm income in climatically suitable areas.

Mining is an important land use in localised areas around Broken Hill, Cobar, Lightning Ridge and White Cliffs and is significant in supporting the larger towns and creating employment.

Tourism is an emerging industry. Towns and landholders (through 'farmstays') cater for tourists and recreational hunters. Developing activities include aquaculture, bush tucker production, commercialised conservation, (frequently referred to as enterprise based conservation) and carbon sequestration through forestry.

A large number of tenures in the towns of the Western Division are Western Lands Leases for the purposes of residence or business. Holders of these leases and of agriculture leases may apply to have them converted to freehold.

There are over 1,200 Crown Reserves in the Western Division, 299 of which have Reserve Management Trusts. These lands are reserved for purposes such as public recreation, commons, urban services, showgrounds, public halls, cemeteries, schools and hospitals.

An area of some 9.4 million hectares (29% of the Western Division and 11% of NSW) is Unincorporated, meaning it has no direct local government. The Unincorporated Area includes the villages of Silverton, Tibooburra and Milparinka.

The Department of Lands is currently responsible for coordinating some local government-type services in this area.

The Western Division has had a long evolution of tenures, with a series of amendments to the Western Lands Act, and reviews of the tenure and socio-economic issues. These reviews include:

- the Royal Commission of 1901
- the Hassall and Associates report of 1982
- the joint Select Committee of NSW Parliament Enquiry of 1983
- the Western Lands Review of 2000.

The reports of these reviews and the books *Out of the West* by Dick Condon (2002) and *100 years – Celebrating Natural Resource Progress in the Western Division of NSW* by Maree Barnes and Geoff Wise (2003) variously provide detail of the history.

For more information

For more information on Western Division issues contact your local Department of Lands office.

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Note: This does not constitute legal advice.

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