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A river runs through it

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BEER'S been the only thing flowing in Tilpa for 20 years _ until now. The rapids have finally surged through Colin Middleton's property in the far west.

Three weeks ago the Darling River which passes through grazier Mr Middleton's property at Tilpa in the state's far west was nothing but a dry, cracked riverbed. But on Friday Mr Middleton couldn't believe his eyes when water rapids surged through.

He was so elated he rushed down to the river with his son-in-law Matthew Elliott to capture something he wasn't sure he'd see again. "I thought it was a mirage. I had to drink it to see if it was real," Mr Middleton said.

"It was bloody magnificent, it's the first time in 20 years I have seen fresh flowing drinkable water. It's been so desperate for the past six years."

In January Prime Minister John Howard announced his \$10 billion water security plan to help restore the Murray-Darling Basin. In 24 days he will turn the taps off to drought-stricken irrigators because there is not enough water in the catchment. Despite this, the water on Mr Middleton's property is now 1m deep and it runs 50km through his property. The water has travelled down from southern Queensland after widespread rainfall two weeks ago.

Falls of up to 80mm were recorded in NSW at the same time with Mr Middleton's 40,000ha sheep property receiving 30mm _ the first decent rainfall in five years. He said last time there was any water in the river was nine months ago but it had since turned into stagnant pools with blue-green algae.

"The murky pools of water overflowed and out popped fish when the water rush came through. We didn't know fish lived there," he said.

"It was unfit for stock consumption let alone to have things live in there."

He said the recent flows should last until spring. They were a much-needed lifeline to survive during the worst drought in 100 years. The Bureau of Meteorology expected isolated showers in the far west today. They will extend up to the Queensland border in the northwest of the state by tomorrow. On Friday rain is predicted on central parts of the coast and adjacent ranges with scattered showers over most the state.



Rain man ... Colin Middleton on his Tilpa property where a dry, cracked riverbed has been replenished as the Darling flows once more. / The Daily Telegraph

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