



ENGINEERING — Water & Environmental Specialists · Gold Coast · SEQ & NSW

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR DEVELOPERS, BUILDERS & PROJECT MANAGERS

The NSW DA Process Map

A practical guide for developers, builders, and project managers preparing for environmental assessment in New South Wales — the four pathways, the full DA sequence, and the three places projects most commonly lose time.

Written for the people who have to build the project, not just lodge it.

INTRODUCTION

What this is, and who it's for

This guide maps the development application process in New South Wales, and the four assessment pathways a project can take: a Complying Development Certificate (CDC), a Development Application (DA), a Review of Environmental Factors (REF), or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). It's written for developers, builders, and project managers — the people who have to deliver a project, not just describe it in a report.

Getting the pathway right at the start matters more than getting any single document right. Every cost, every specialist engagement, and every month of the program flows from that first decision. This guide explains the process in plain terms so you can plan around it — and spot the decisions that, if made early, save months later.

The single most expensive mistake in environmental approvals is confirming the wrong pathway — or confirming the right one too late. Get the pathway right in week one and most other problems become manageable.

The next pages set out the full DA sequence as a flow with indicative NSW timelines, compare the four assessment pathways side by side, cover the three places projects lose time, and finish with a pre-lodgement checklist organised by specialist discipline.

From feasibility to consent

01

Feasibility & site assessment

● EKO PROJECT-MANAGED

2-6 WEEKS (INDICATIVE)

The site is assessed against the planning instruments that apply — the Local Environmental Plan, relevant SEPPs, and council DCPs. Constraints are identified: zoning, overlays, mapped biodiversity, flooding, bushfire, heritage, and water.

02

Confirm the assessment pathway

● EKO PROJECT-MANAGED

WEEK ONE OF ENGAGEMENT

The project is matched to the correct pathway: CDC, DA, REF, or EIS (see the side-by-side comparison on page 5). This decision drives every cost and timeline that follows. It belongs in week one — not after lodgement.

03

Scope & engage the specialists

● EKO PROJECT-MANAGED

2-4 WEEKS (INDICATIVE)

A typical NSW DA needs five to seven specialists — ecology, heritage, bushfire, arborist, contamination, and the water-related assessments. Each is scoped and sequenced. Seasonal survey windows are booked early so they never become the critical path.

Lodgement to build-ready

04

Prepare & coordinate documents

● EKO PROJECT-MANAGED

6–16 WEEKS (INDICATIVE)

Each assessment is prepared and cross-checked for internal consistency. Reports that contradict each other are the most common trigger for a Request for Information. Coordination here is what prevents the back-and-forth that costs projects months.

05

Lodge & manage RFIs

● EKO PROJECT-MANAGED

ASSESSMENT: 8–26+ WEEKS (VARIES BY COUNCIL)

The package is lodged through the NSW Planning Portal. Requests for Information from council and referral agencies are managed centrally — routed to the right specialist, answered, and returned for sign-off without bouncing back to you.

06

Determination, conditions & CC

● EKO PROJECT-MANAGED

2–6 WEEKS TO BUILD-READY (INDICATIVE)

Approval arrives as a Notice of Determination with conditions of consent. These are translated into a plain-English compliance schedule, pre-construction conditions are cleared, and the project moves to Construction Certificate. This is where most consultants stop — and where build-ready work begins.

Timelines are indicative ranges for a typical mid-scale NSW DA and vary by council, scale, and referral triggers.

CHOOSING THE ROUTE

The four assessment pathways, side by side

Which pathway applies is a legal question answered by the planning instruments that cover your site — not a preference. The wrong answer here is the most expensive mistake in the whole process.

CDC

Complying Development Certificate

Low-impact development that meets every pre-set standard in the applicable SEPP. Assessed by a certifier, not council.

TIMELINE

Fast — typically weeks, not months

REQUIRES

No merit assessment; strict eligibility

DA

Development Application

The standard consent route for most development under Part 4 of the EP&A Act. Merit-assessed by council against the LEP and DCP.

TIMELINE

Months — scale and referrals drive it

REQUIRES

SEE or EIS + specialist reports

REF

Review of Environmental Factors

For Part 5 activities — typically infrastructure and works by or for public authorities that don't need development consent.

TIMELINE

Proponent-controlled timing

REQUIRES

Internal assessment; no public consent

EIS

Environmental Impact Statement

For designated and State Significant Development, or where impacts are likely to be significant. The most rigorous pathway.

TIMELINE

Longest — SEARs, exhibition, agencies

REQUIRES

Full impact assessment + exhibition

Indicative only — pathway selection is site- and instrument-specific. We confirm it in week one of every engagement.

Three places projects most commonly lose time

1 The wrong pathway lodged

When the assessment pathway is confirmed after specialists are engaged — or after lodgement — changing direction can cost three to six months. What to do instead: confirm the pathway against the LEP, SEPPs, and biodiversity triggers at feasibility, before any specialist is contracted.

2 Incomplete specialist coordination

Each assessment references the others. When the ecology report and the stormwater report assume different site layouts, council issues an RFI and the project waits while seven consultants pass the document around. What to do instead: have one party cross-check every report for consistency before lodgement, not after.

3 Inadequate water-related impact assessment

Water quality, flooding, and stormwater are the assessment components that consistently attract the most agency scrutiny in NSW — and the most RFIs. What to do instead: have the water components written by engineers who write water for a living, anticipating the agency's questions rather than responding to them.

Pre-lodgement checklist

Run through this before you lodge. If you can't tick an item, it's worth a conversation before the application goes in.

- ☐ PLANNING — The pathway (CDC / DA / REF / EIS) is confirmed in writing against the LEP and SEPPs.
- ☐ PLANNING — The SEE or EIS scope matches the pathway and the council's requirements list.
- ☐ ECOLOGY — Biodiversity Offsets Scheme triggers (BDAR thresholds) have been assessed.
- ☐ ECOLOGY — Seasonal survey windows are identified and booked where required.
- ☐ WATER — Water quality, flood, and stormwater assessments are scoped to the agency's expectations.
- ☐ WATER — Erosion and sediment control requirements and certification needs are known.
- ☐ HERITAGE / BUSHFIRE / ARBORIST / CONTAMINATION — every triggered specialist is engaged and sequenced.
- ☐ COORDINATION — All specialist reports are cross-checked for internal consistency before lodgement.
- ☐ POST-DETERMINATION — A plan exists for translating conditions of consent into a working schedule.

HOW EKO ENGINEERING HELPS

One point of contact for the whole environmental workstream.

We project-manage the environmental side of your NSW DA end to end — pathway assessment in week one, the right specialists scoped and coordinated through our trusted network, lodgement and RFIs handled, and conditions of consent translated into a schedule your site team can actually follow.

- Fixed scope, fixed fee
- Work around your operational reality
- Recommendations that actually get implemented
- The right approach, assessed up front
- Plain-English documentation
- Site-ready summaries for the people doing the work

Book a free 30-minute project review

www.ekoengineering.com.au

We'll tell you the likely pathway, the assessments you'll need, and a realistic timeline.