

Developing the new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy - an evolution of catchment-based approach to sustaining living waterways

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Key Points

- The new Victorian Waterway Strategy is under development to guide how we manage Victorian rivers, wetlands, estuaries and floodplains over the next 10 years.
- Key topics raised through engagement with partners and stakeholders for the new strategy to consider include recognising and adapting to climate change, waterways as living connected entities and Traditional Owner rights and obligations.
- The strategy underpins the environmental, cultural, social and economic values of waterways, and will contain statewide policies and actions to guide investment in protecting, maintaining or improving environmental condition.

Abstract

The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action is developing a new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy to guide how we manage Victorian waterways into the future. The existing Victorian Waterway Management Strategy was released in 2013, providing a detailed policy framework for managing the health of Victoria's rivers, wetlands, estuaries and floodplains but it has reached the end of its lifespan.

Living waterways underpin environmental, economic, cultural and social values, but our industries and population have altered their natural state. Flows in many waterways have been impacted by the construction of dams and weirs to enable water to be stored and used for industry, agriculture and towns, and development of their floodplains. Victoria's waterway management program responds to these impacts, enabling waterway managers to proactively manage for environmental outcomes that provide broader benefits. They use a range of targeted management tools including environmental water, riparian works, and pest programs alongside partnership and knowledge building and sharing.

A new strategy is needed to ensure we have strong policies in place for managing Victoria's waterways, particularly in the face of our changing population and climate conditions. A key focus of the new strategy will be identifying pathways to increase Traditional Owner self-determination and decision-making in waterway management. Public consultation on a Discussion Starter occurred in 2023, and a draft strategy is expected to be released for public consultation late in 2024. This presentation will discuss challenges, opportunities and proposed directions in waterway policy to achieve environmental outcomes at a range of scales - from the local and regional, statewide and jointly across the Murray Darling Basin.

Keywords

Living Waterways

Traditional Owner Partnership

Climate change adaptation

Murray Darling Basin

Outcomes at Meaningful Scales

Introduction

A draft Victorian Waterway Management Strategy is currently being prepared for Victorian Government consideration, with public consultation expected to commence late in 2024. The current Victorian Waterway Management Strategy is at the end of its lifespan and there is still a clear need for statewide policy to direct efforts to sustain waterways in the face of significant ongoing and new threats. There have also been several advances in legislation and related policy that need to be reflected in waterway management, including to respond to climate change and identify pathways to increase Traditional Owner self-determination and decision-making in waterway management. This paper captures the nature of discussions with key partners and stakeholders to date about what the new strategy could contain. The paper is provided without prejudice as a synthesis of those discussions held by the Department, and does not claim to represent a position of the Victorian Government.

The new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy will provide the framework for government, in partnership with Traditional Owners and community, to sustain living waterways so that they can continue to provide environmental, social, cultural and economic values for all Victorians.

What is changing in Victoria's approach?

The development of the new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy provides a significant opportunity to clearly articulate Victoria's approach to waterway management, which incorporates rivers, estuaries, wetlands and floodplains within a single framework. An Independent Review of the existing Victorian Waterway Management Strategy (2013) found that it had provided a good basis to manage Victoria's waterways. It led to improvements in many areas and provided a solid platform for regional planning, investment and on-ground management. The Review also identified areas that could be strengthened in the new Strategy, including the need to tackle new pressures, particularly from those associated with climate change and population growth as well as an ongoing need to focus on addressing the legacy of past impacts to Victoria's waterways.

This is the third Victorian waterway strategy; previous versions were ground-breaking for their time and each iteration represents an evolution to become more inclusive: ecologically and socially. The first 2002 River Health Strategy brought together a clear framework for the management of rivers, and the 2013 strategy broadened the framework to include wetlands and estuaries. The 2002 strategy had little recognition of First Nations or community involvement, and the 2013 strategy recognised the value of Traditional Owner inclusion and citizen science. Neither the 2002 or 2013 strategy focussed on climate change and climate adaptation, nor did they integrate specific policies for the management of waterways in urban settings. The new strategy will outline and reconfirm (where appropriate) a policy framework, expectations and guidance for Victoria's approach to waterway management, including the roles of Traditional Owners, waterway managers under the *Water Act 1989*, the Victorian Environmental Water Holder and other partners. The strategy will also identify a new suite of state-wide actions to support improved decision making and policy implementation over the next 10 years. This is likely to include policies for floodplain connectivity, climate change adaptation, and integration with urban planning for improved stormwater management, First Nation voices as well as specific policies to support self-determination and increased role for Traditional Owners in decision on waterway management.

Strategy development has been enabling direct and honest conversation about the significant threats and challenges facing our waterway environments over the next 10 years and beyond. When finalised, it will provide transparent guidance on regional decision making, which will be outcome driven and more adaptive to seasonal conditions and climate projections. Water for the environment is to be more integrated with other waterway management activities and integrated water management in urban areas may provide

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opportunities to achieve regional waterway objectives. We expect the new strategy to continue to drive government investment in regional waterway management functions (including environmental water management) and partnerships and to also leverage investment through other local, state and federal agencies who contribute to supporting and protecting waterway values.

Vision and Objectives

The new strategy could represent a shift from the objective of improving or maintaining environmental condition (health) of priority waterways, to a focus on sustaining waterways as living connected entities. This acknowledges that all waterways play a role in living systems. Resilience and adaptation will need to be recognised as critical concepts in the face of climate change on top of a legacy of decline and other contemporary threats. We need to both value current ecosystem functions and allow for transition so that biodiversity is sustained. We also need to continue to prioritise where we invest, and our climate change framework will guide statewide policy and the regional waterway management framework to guide difficult conversations and decisions with communities. This will need to consider whether resilience is a feasible management objective, or if transition or transform objectives may be needed to support waterway ecosystems.

In waterway and catchment management it has long been acknowledged that communities valuing and caring for living waterways is a reciprocal relationship. It is important we continue to recognise and support this. There are evident challenges with changing demographics and attitudes impacting on waterways and also increasing the social value of waterways in urban and regional settings that need to be more explicitly addressed.

Living Waterways

It is proposed that the new strategy recognise waterways as living and connected entities. This would require a conceptual shift in how we see, plan for and walk together to care for waterways. The concept links traditional ecological knowledge, integrated catchment management and ecosystem-based approaches. To be successful in this shift, management approaches would consider the lateral and longitudinal connectivity regardless of institutional boundaries and land tenure, the spiritual connections and custodianship of Traditional Owners, and the connections of communities.

These concepts build on work for iconic urban waterways in Victoria, including the ground-breaking *Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act 2017*, and *Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo* (the Yarra Strategic Plan). The strategic focus is on collaboration towards a 50 year community vision, and informed by Wurundjeri Woi wurrung and Bunurong objectives for Country. The approach respects the river and its lands as one integrated living natural entity with which we have a relationship with, and obligations to care for.

First Nations and Traditional Owners

Only very recently, and too late, are we acknowledging the cultural and ancestral rights of First Nations to care for Country. Victoria's Yoorrook Justice Commission is leading the important work of truth-telling with its current inquiry addressing land and water injustice – and its work and those who have shared their stories cannot be adequately summarised but must be digested – see <https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au/topic/land-sky-and-waters/> (2024). The vision and objectives of the new strategy is being culturally informed by partnerships with Victorian Traditional Owners, through multiple and individualised engagement pathways that respect First Nations sovereignty.

Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap 2022 is the Victorian Government's policy response to First Nations rights and aspirations for water in Victoria. It commits that Traditional Owners can make formal partnership agreements with the water sector that increase the capacity and resources available to Traditional Owners to make and implement decisions about water landscape management on their Country. It also commits to Traditional Owners increased role in determining how environmental water is

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used for the purpose of healing Country, and, in the longer term, recognition of Traditional Owners as waterway managers for specific locations and as environmental water holders.

The new strategy will embed these commitments into the waterway management framework, and elaborate on how these outcomes can be achieved. The new strategy will be underpinned by the principles of self-determination, free, prior and informed consent and protection of First Nations data sovereignty. A responsive partnership model has been developed to enable the strategy to be informed by Traditional Owners and where their cultural lens is offered, it can be included.

Integrated and regional approach to waterway management

Our waterways are managed for multiple outcomes against a backdrop of 200 years of modification and impact. There are still multiple threats and climate change is placing additional pressure on already stressed rivers, wetlands and their floodplains.

In Victoria we have strong evidence of what can be delivered for our rivers and wetlands through water recovery and active management of environmental water as part of an integrated approach that includes other critical management activities, like pest control, riparian fencing and revegetation, and removal of fish barriers. However, we also know that relying only on natural flooding on highly modified floodplains will not get the environmental outcomes we are after, particularly during dry times. This is evident at our Living Murray icon sites, where floodplain vegetation that receives more frequent, regular flows via engineered works is in better condition than areas that receive unregulated flooding only. That's why environmental works and measures have always been part of Victoria's approach across the state.

A catchment-based approach has been and will continue to be the centrepiece of Victoria's waterway management framework – this is in recognition that different approaches are needed for different systems depending on the key threats and management context.

The new strategy will reinforce the need for regional planning and actions to drive towards clear outcomes that are set at appropriate scales, and that all available tools need to be considered to support living waterways. This will also need monitoring, evaluation and reporting that informs adaptive management locally and programs that demonstrate the long-term impact of investment at key waterways – adopting the learnings from Victoria's Flagship Waterways program, outlined in *Water for Victoria* 2016. New regional waterway strategies that provide a single planning framework for all waterways in each region will be developed by 2027. Regional outcomes are to be developed collaboratively with partners and community and apply a climate adaptation approach.

Conclusions

Partners and stakeholders have raised common themes for the new strategy to consider and embed in how Victoria manages its waterways. We have made big gains with our policies and investments in waterway health over the past 20 years. We have learnt by doing and the strategy is an opportunity to embed lessons learnt, fill critical gaps and continue to evolve our management tools to provide our waterways the best chance to adapt to climate change. Next steps are to work with partners to refine proposed directions into clear policies and actions to test through public consultation. This is expected to occur by late 2024, to inform a final strategy by mid-2025.

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