



The Goulburn Valley Environment Group Inc.

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The Executive Officer
Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Inquiry into the Management, Governance and Use of Environmental Water

On behalf of Goulburn Valley Environment Group (GVEG) I thank you for the opportunity to make a submission the inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water.

GVEG now provides comment on the four points detailed in the Terms of Reference as follows:

1. The assessment of the role of environmental water management in preventing or causing 'blackwater' events;

The mission of the Victorian Environment Water Holder (VEWH) is to improve the environmental health of rivers, wetlands and floodplains by managing Victoria's environmental water holdings and cooperating with partners and communities. The VEWH is required to environmental water in such a way that Victoria's environmental assets are protected and enhanced

Environmental water management in Victoria is difficult given the restrictions and conditions imposed on waterway managers.

Without doubt environmental outcomes can be maximised when environmental water is used to achieve frequent and timely out of bank flows. It is extremely unfortunate that the current government would appear to not to sanction the use of environmental water to achieve or contribute to an overbank flood. This position, reached because of the threat of legal action by a small number of vocal landowners, is severely restricting the VEWH and waterway managers to achieve their mission. This means we are never going to be able to get the best possible gains from the use of environmental water.

Waterway managers are therefore forced to rely of naturally available waterway flows to get water into some areas of the floodplain. This infrequent and partial inundation of flood plain is prone to creating blackwater events.

The committee responsible for this current inquiry know full well that blackwater is a complex issue, with how long since the last inundation being perhaps the main driver of large blackwater events. By not allowing or preventing overbank flooding the government is actually contributing to the ongoing problem of blackwater.

Generally speaking, the initial cause of mobilisation of oxygen poor water will be a natural event that pushes water over bank. On occasions, environmental water may contribute to higher flows that mobilise blackwater, but given the inability to push large quantities of environmental water down our waterways this is not ever going to be the major cause of blackwater events.

Indeed, periodic lower bench inundation with environmental water would help mitigate blackwater events during high waterway flows.

An important component of ecologically healthy waterways is carbon. Whilst blackwater is an undesirable outcome on the floodplain the mobilisation and movement of carbon is vital for the ongoing ecological health of our waterways and wetlands. Environment water is essential in supporting this process and its use needs to be optimised where and whenever possible

The main thing that needs to be pointed out here is that environmental water is all about maintaining, and where possible improving the condition and quality of Victoria's waterways and wetlands. Healthy waterways generate good quality water for irrigation, urban consumption and natural amenity and condition, all things that underpin productive farming and living in areas where irrigators operate.

2. How environmental water and environmental water managers interact with, and utilise, management tools such as carryover and whether the carryover of environmental water impacts on the availability of water for irrigators;

Environmental water holders have the same rights as other water holders and the responsibility to manage environmental water to optimise environmental outcomes. This

means that in some years there will be environmental water that will not be required and will be carried over for use in subsequent years under the same rules as other water holders with an extremely low risk of impacting on water allocations. All water holders that elect to carry over water impact other water holder equally.

An important issue in regard to environmental water is timing of use. Environmental water is often used early in spring, a time when seasonal allocations are still being determined. The ability to carry over water is important for this to occur. This early use, often before the traditional high inflow months has the added benefit of freeing up storage capacity for irrigators.

3. Consideration of what barriers exist to the more efficient use of environmental water and how these may be addressed;

Access to wetlands is a significant issue. In areas like the floodplains of northern Victoria there are many wetlands that cannot be accessed with environmental water. Some work has been done to access important wetlands but this is an area that could be improved by utilising existing water authorities to carry out further works.

Levee banks pose a problem for environmental water managers. They prevent lower bench and anabranch inundation that would contribute significantly to waterway health. Where possible and practicable these levee banks should be removed or modified.

Much of the work being done to generate the water savings that contribute to environmental water is being done at a local scale; renewing and decommissioning old leaking channels. This is having both a positive and a negative effect. The positive being the generation of environmental water and the negative being the devastation of local resilience reliant on these leaks.

Management of the regions aquatic and wetland dependant fauna and flora should be done in a holistic way. If it was there would be recognition of the loss of hundreds of resilience hotspots that are being taken out and a program put in place to support landowners that are happy to contribute to, and maintain some of these places.

4. Assessment of fees and charges applied to environmental water and whether these differ from those imposed on other water users.

It is very clear that we all benefit immensely from a healthy natural environment. And conversely, our businesses and communities would be unviable if our waterways were to become degraded to a point where water quality and amenity were compromised.

Works undertaken to protect, maintain and enhance natural ecological processes and dependant species should be happening as a matter of course. The state of the environment

reports highlight that we are still failing to address the decline in our natural assets and considerable additional investment is needed.

The fees and charges imposed on environment water should have regard to the benefits generated to individual enterprises and the community in general.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Terry Court". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Terry Court

Vice President, GVEG

Protecting the environment for generations to come