Victoria's Murray-Darling Basin Plan Implementation Highlights 2023-24



Goulburn River. Shepparton. Image source: Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action



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Introduction

For many decades now, Victoria has worked with urgency and purpose to improve water management and environmental outcomes in the Murray-Darling Basin. Victoria has played a leading role in Basin water reform, beginning with the introduction of extraction caps in 1992, and championed effective river and floodplain restoration programs through the Living Murray Program, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary of successful reforms in December 2023. Similarly, Victoria has led the way in supporting the development of, and delivering, the objectives of the Basin Plan since its commencement in 2012.

Our priority for implementing the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (Basin Plan) has always been achieving its environmental objectives while balancing environmental, cultural, social and economic considerations. Water recovery under the Basin Plan is supporting the protection and restoration of many Ramsar listed wetlands, threatened species, and water-dependent ecosystems across the Basin.

The quality of water resources in the Basin supports a healthy environment and is crucial to the ongoing success of regional communities and businesses who rely on water from the Basin to support their livelihoods. While natural factors will always be the strongest drivers of water quality, in its monitoring and management of water storages, waterways, and catchments Victoria continues to apply best-practice water management and innovative monitoring techniques to keep overall water quality fit-for-purpose. In 23-24, Victoria continued its leading role in water quality management, through the development of innovative modelling and use of advanced technology such as Aerial Electromagnetic survey to better map, assess, manage and account for salinity impacts across northern Victoria.

Victoria has delivered 826 GL of our 1,075 GL water recovery target and remains focused on completing as many SDLAM projects as possible ahead of December 2026, and finding a pathway for viable projects that will deliver real environmental outcomes to be completed beyond that date.

We are committed to recovering additional environmental water towards the 450GL, utilising the approach set out in Victoria's *Planning our Basin future together* – The prospectus which seeks to achieve environmental outcomes while minimising socioeconomic impact and placing communities at the centre of decision making. Our consultation on the prospectus throughout May and June has shown that our communities support this approach.

Victoria continues to be a vocal advocate for the water interests and aspirations of First Nations communities and the release of *Water Is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap* in 2022 provided an important pathway to supporting Traditional Owner aspirations for an increased role in water management in Victoria. There was meaningful progress in 2023-24 towards outcomes for Traditional Owners supported by key partnerships and Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) engagement.

This report highlights Victoria's achievements in 2023-24, as we continue to implement the Basin Plan. The document summarises key highlights from detailed information provided in the Schedule 12 Annual Reporting templates and the five yearly reports, which cover Victoria's statutory obligations in relation to reporting on implementation of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Environmental Outcomes

Victoria's long-standing approach to securing environmental outcomes in the highly regulated Murray River system is pragmatic and evidence based. We invest in monitoring programs that show our approach improving the health of our rivers, wetlands and floodplains and the native plants and animals that depend on them.

The Victorian Government has invested \$248 million over the last four years (2020–24) to improve catchment and waterway health across regional Victoria, including northern Victoria. It has committed a similar amount over the next four years.

Since 2012, monitoring and expert assessment of 54 waterways where environmental water and other management actions were prioritised in the Victorian Murray-Darling Basin shows:

- Ramsar sites are being protected and restored at Hattah, Gunbower, Barmah, and parts of the Kerang Lakes
- Threatened species presence and abundance is improving in around half of the waterways, including iconic species such as Murray cod, trout cod, Murray-Darling rainbow fish and Australasian bittern
- Non-threatened species are being protected or restored, implying strengthened resilience to climate change, particularly for fish in rivers, and for waterbirds and tree condition (river red gum and black box) in wetlands
- Longitudinal connectivity is being protected and restored in main river systems, represented by fish movement and distribution
- Improvements in fish recruitment and dispersal at around half of the waterways
- Maintenance of vegetation recruitment in most rivers, with improvements at some sites such as in the Campaspe
- Maintenance of waterbird breeding, with improvements in Barmah Forest and Hattah Lakes, Gaynor Swamp, Lake Yando, McDonalds Swamp, Richardsons Lagoon and Wirra-Lo Wetlands.



Waterbirds - Darters (Photo: Mallee Catchment Management Authority, 2023)

For the year 2023-24, unregulated flows met or exceeded planned watering actions when most major water storages in northern Victoria spilled. After these events, 26 assets were watered to extend unregulated river flows or wetland inundation, or to improve water quality for ecosystem health and resilience, including three Ramsar sites: Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes, Gunbower Forest, and Barmah Forest.

Watering coordination was improved after the 2022 floods. Waterway and water storage managers and environmental water holders worked closely together to support native fish populations, waterbirds and floodplain plant growth, and prevent further boosting of increased carp populations.

Consultation through Environmental Water Advisory Groups (EWAGs) supported environmental, cultural, social and Traditional Owner perspectives and outcomes - e.g. the First Peoples of the Millewa-Mallee Aboriginal Corporation worked with Mallee Catchment management Authority (CMA), the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH) and DEECA on delivery of 100ML of environmental water in May 2024 to Musk Duck Wetland (previously Neds Corner East) supporting native vegetation important to Traditional Owners.

Over the last eight years, investment in complementary measures needed to support environmental water outcomes in northern Victoria has included pest plant and animals controlled in over 233,700 ha, revegetation of more than 4815 ha, over 1000 snags returned to support native fish, over 945 km of riparian fencing installed, livestock grazing managed over more than 4622 ha, and fishways built on key barriers (e.g., Koondrook Weir, Tea Garden Weir, Taylors Creek Weir, Cudgewa Creek).

Watering case studies

#1 Environmental water deliveries in the Gunbower Forest Ramsar site supplemented natural flooding events in spring 2022 and winter 2023, extending unregulated flow inundation by 60 days, protecting river red gum and aquatic vegetation communities. Waterbird habitat improved, supporting over 2,000 birds (including 1,000 juvenile birds), and successful breeding of little black cormorant, Australasian darter and little pied cormorant.

#2 Monitoring of turtle response to environmental water at the Barmah Forest Ramsar site showed that landscape-scale flooding positively affects body condition, recruitment, and population size of the three species, the broad-shelled turtle, eastern long-necked turtle, and the Murray River turtle. Monitoring revealed male Murray River turtles are capable of travelling over 100 km per year during wet conditions.

#3 High rainfall in late 2023 and early 2024 mobilised organic debris into the lower Broken Creek and lower Goulburn River, leading to a 'blackwater event'. Dissolved oxygen fell, and struggling golden perch, shrimp and Murray spiny crayfish were reported. However large numbers of fish and crustacean deaths were avoided when high flows receded to normal operational levels, and environmental water was delivered that supported critical refuges, slowed dropping of the river which protected banks from erosion, and supplied prolonged flow of good water quality.

#4 The significant floods of spring 2022 supported 835 young birds at the Central Murray and Boort wetlands, including threatened species of blue-billed ducks, musk ducks and magpie geese.
Environmental water was then delivered in 2023 that ensured continued habitat and food sources for them, as well as restoration of river red gum communities.

Water Quality

Salinity Management

Victoria remains compliant with its obligations under Basin Salinity Management 2030 Strategy (BSM2030) and Schedule B of the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement. Victoria has maintained the State's salinity register in a net credit position of -23 EC (based on the draft 2024 salinity register on 26 September). Victoria's salinity management actions keep salt out of the Murray River and provided a water quality benefit at Morgan, South Australia.

Salinity targets for the purposes of long-term salinity planning and management are set out in section 9.19 of the Basin Plan. The targets are set by Basin Plan Long Term Salinity - End of Valley Targets of the BSM 2030 and were reported through the BSM2030 Victorian Comprehensive Report 2023 using 2017-2023 data.

End of Valley Target (EoVT) sites were introduced under the Basin Salinity Management Strategy (2001-2015) to serve as indicators of catchment health of tributary systems, and to help assess and manage the impacts of salt exports from catchments to the shared water resources in the Murray-Darling Basin.

Salinity and salt load for the reporting period were generally lower than the benchmark period (1 July 1975 to 30 June 2000), but have increased slightly in some tributary catchments due to higher-than-average rainfall and the 2022-23 floods.

Victoria has undertaken the following key salinity management activities in 2023-24:

- Completed an Aerial Electromagnetic (AEM) survey flights to assess soil salinity in the Murray River corridor and commenced data analysis by Mallee CMA. AEM will give us scientific information on salinity process that may influence water quality in waterways.
- Applied the innovative 'Integrated Accountable Action Model' to the Barr Creek Catchment Strategy by North Central CMA which will improve the accuracy of salinity accounting and improve the understanding of processes impacting flow and salt load for this accountable action.
- Renewed Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan by Goulburn Broken CMA.



Foto: Airborne Electromagnetic Survey (AEM) data collection array (April 2024 MCMA)

Infrastructure projects

Goulburn Murray Water Efficiency Project

On 30 April 2024, the \$177.5 million GMW Water Efficiency Project (WEP) completed 254km of irrigation modernisation and rationalisation across the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District to achieve 15.9 GL (LTAAY) in water savings issued to the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder as a Basin Plan contribution. In doing so, the project met its Commonwealth-State contractual obligations on time and within budget – a significant success for Victoria in delivering on its Basin Plan commitments and the largest contribution to the additional 450GL of water for the environment to date.

The project delivered an estimated 1,210 regional jobs during the life of the project and an estimated GDP increase of \$148 million to the region – a significant economic stimulus during a period of covid-19 impacts and extreme weather that affected northern Victoria.

The GMW WEP project commenced in 2021 following public consultation to assess its ability to deliver positive socio-economic impacts for regional communities. The Department audited all water savings from all works to verify they are real and comply with State protocols, prior to issuing water recovery to the environment.

This achievement is also significant in that it wraps up Australia's largest water savings program of works in the GMID as part of the \$2.1 billion Connections Project and recent \$177.5 million WEP. Together, these projects collectively achieved 450 GL in water savings from around 2,300 km of irrigation modernisation between 2016 and 2023.

Together, the delivery of the GMW's WEP and the prior Connections Project has contributed to transforming the efficiency and economic viability of the GMID in the face of climate variability.



Goulburn Murray Water Modernised Regulator Structure. Image Source: Goulburn Murray Water

Sunraysia Water Efficiency Project

The \$37.9 million Sunraysia WEP, funded by the Australian Government as a State-led project under the Off-Farm Efficiency Program, commenced in 2022. The project will upgrade and remove outdated water infrastructure in the Mildura, Red Cliffs, and Merbein Irrigation Districts, delivering up to 27km of irrigation modernisation, the removal or upgrade of up to 279 Dethridge meters, and the installation of modern flow meters for up to 210 domestic and stock outlets.

The project will provide significant efficiencies in water delivery systems, helping Sunraysia maintain its competitive advantage in the agri-food sector, provide more than 100 construction and delivery jobs in the region, and an estimated regional GDP increase of more than \$20 million.

Since commencement, the project has delivered approximately 3km of channel lining in sections of the Red Cliffs and Mildura Irrigation Districts and works to over 350 small meter outlets throughout Merbein, Red Cliffs and Mildura. Works are underway to deliver a significant program of construction in the 2024-25 financial year, with the project on track to complete construction in late 2024.

The project will generate 1.8GL (LTAAY) of water savings to contribute to the additional 450GL of water for the environment as part of the Murray Darling Basin Plan. In May 2024, Victoria issued the first 0.3 GL of water recovery to the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder. Any water savings above the 1.8GL LTAAY will be shared equally between Traditional Owners and urban water security for Mallee towns.



Mildura Irrigation Channel. Image Source: Lower Murray Water

Constraints Measures Program (CMP)

Victoria finalised and published *The feasibility of relaxing constraints in Northern Victoria* and other accompanying technical reports, technical appendices and communications materials including factsheets and Commonly Asked Questions (26 June 2024). These documents can be accessed at: Victorian Constraints Measures Program (<u>water.vic.gov.au</u>)

The inclusion of comprehensive technical materials highlights the quality of the science, modelling, engagement, and committee consultation underpinning the Victorian program.

The study confirms the in-principle benefits of constraints relaxation, however finds further investigation is required to clarify how implementation and impacts will be managed. The study also confirms the need for further meaningful consultation with communities before any decision on implementation. This information is being provided to the public to continue Victoria's commitment to transparently assess each of its Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism (SDLAM) projects on its merits.

Victoria's report, in partnership with stakeholder agencies, is the culmination of two years of deliberation and technical work overseen by a Consultative Committee of key stakeholders. The Consultative Committee included private landholders, Goulburn Murray Water, environmental agencies, Traditional Owners, local government and representative bodies.

Development of the feasibility study included:

• Publication of 12 supporting technical reports

- 190km of modernised bathymetry and 30 cross sections on the Goulburn River
- Updated hydrological and inundation modelling of over 45,000ha of the Victorian Murray and Goulburn floodplains
- Drone surveys over significant sites during major flooding events to ground truth inundation mapping
- 13 Consultative Committee meetings
- "Kitchen table" meetings held in each river reach with Consultative Committee members and local landowners
- conducting targeted discussion with interest groups
- Hydrometric network upgrade of 13 gauges at 11 locations in the mid-Goulburn.
- Participation from 15 Traditional Owner groups in a series of discussions including on-Country talks
- 6x "What We Have Heard" reports from Traditional Owners, submitted to the Victorian Minister for Water.

The study oversaw the development of fit-for-purpose technical information which included river channel surveys, hydrological and hydraulic modelling. Where possible, on ground validation of the model runs occurred, providing a strong visual cue for the reliability of the data.



Drone photo near Brimin Lodge. Image source: Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action

The suite of technical work can be used as a key input to future coordinating processes that articulate a whole of system understanding of the risks and benefits of relaxing constraints in Victoria. The Consultative Committee's diverse views and experiences have highlighted the importance of:

- an outline of the benefits at a system-scale;
- acknowledging up front the risks and how they will be managed; and
- demonstrating how there will be meaningful engagement with the public before any decision on implementation

Victoria is also actively participating in the development of the Constraints Roadmap with other Basin jurisdictions, which is due to be completed by the end of 2024.

Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project (VMFRP)

Victoria is well advanced with delivering the VMFRP to restore health and increase climate resilience for 14,000 hectares of environmentally high value and culturally rich Murray River Floodplain. The VMFRP is being delivered over two stages: Stage 1 (planning approvals and pre-construction) and Stage 2 (construction). The VMFRP was severely impacted by the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 and the October 2022 floods. These challenges had a significant time and cost impact to the project. Consequently, Victoria refocussed its work program to the five central sites and paused the remaining work for the four east and west sites.

During 2023–24, the project made significant progress towards Stage 1 activities. It gained the necessary State and Commonwealth regulatory approvals for four sites (Hattah Lakes North, Belsar-Yungera, Nyah and Vinifera) following an extensive and robust environmental assessment process under the Victorian Planning and Environment and Environment Effects Act and the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act), as well as the preparation of Cultural Heritage Management Plans (CHMP). A fifth site at Burra Creek did not gain approval and will not proceed further as part of the VMFRP.

Through this process, there are clear and demonstrable improvements to environmental and cultural values of the Murray floodplain at the four approved sites. The extensive engagement has also revealed strong community support for the projects. Victoria is now seeking funding from the Commonwealth government for construction of the approved sites and completion of the regulatory approvals for the remaining sites.

As part of the pre-construction phase of the VMFRP there has been a significant time and cost investment to involve and employ Traditional Owners in the planning and design phases of the project. This work is led by the Mallee and North Central CMAs with 14 groups including two Registered Aboriginal Parties Yorta-Yorta and First People of the Millewa Mallee Aboriginal Corporation. For example:

- Traditional Owners have been employed for 2,284 hours on CHMP development, including inputting to the CHMP assessment methodology and adapting where needed, as well as on-ground observations identifying changes to the infrastructure footprints.
- over 125 engagement activities (site-visits, field work, meeting etc) have occurred mainly related to CHMP.
- Up to \$1.6m has been invested to better understand Traditional Owner land and water aspirations for the VMFRP floodplain (e.g., in the Mallee CMA there have been 20 Aboriginal Waterway Assessments¹ completed with 80 participants and 10 groups. In total, the project has completed 54 AWAs culminating in 174 participants).

The VFMRP will complement the Constraints Measures Program by ensuring we can deliver the equivalent of medium and major environmental events at these sites to help restore some of the Victorian Murray's most valuable floodplains. VMFRP infrastructure such as flow regulators, channels, culverts and containment banks will enable Victoria's waterway managers to target inundation events with the frequency, timing and duration needed by floodplain plants and animals. The VMFRP will also enable the watering of critical habitats and drought refuges in dry times.

The VMFRP and Constraints Measure Program are central to delivering environmental and cultural benefits to local communities.

¹ Aboriginal Water Assessments are undertaken with Traditional Owners to better understand the water and land aspirations across the project area. This enables cultural objectives to be identified and inform environmental water use, and when available, cultural water.



Hattah Lakes aerial view. Image source: Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action

Planning Our Basin Future Together

The Victorian Government developed *Planning our Basin future together: a prospectus to safeguard Victoria's environment and communities in the Murray-Darling Basin* (the Prospectus) in response to the legislative changes made to the Basin Plan by the Commonwealth under the *Water Amendment (Restoring our Rivers) Act 2023*. The Prospectus looks at what we have done in the past and what we can do in the future to:

- 1. deliver real environmental outcomes for Victoria and reduce the shortfall under the agreed Basin Plan target, known as the 2750 GL; and
- 2. minimise the impact of the Commonwealth's decision to purchase water for the additional 450 GL (including the removal of socio-economic protections from the Basin Plan).

A community-centred approach to water recovery is at the heart of the Prospectus. The principles for further water recovery outlined in the Prospectus were developed based on lessons learned from working with communities since the Basin Plan was introduced in 2012 and in previous programs. These programs include the GMW Connections Project, and the Broken Reconfiguration Feasibility Study completed in 2024.

Consultation on the Prospectus

The Prospectus was published for public consultation on <u>Engage Victoria</u> on 14 May 2024. Consultation closed on 23 June 2024. During the consultation period, individuals, organisations, or businesses could complete a survey and/or make a submission about Victoria's approach through the Engage Victoria platform. DEECA facilitated 49 consultation sessions for stakeholders and communities across northern Victoria in partnership with water corporations and catchment management authorities during this period. The sessions included two public webinars, and briefings and information sessions held online, in-person or in hybrid formats with delivery partners and stakeholders.

During the consultation period, the Engage Victoria website was viewed 5,037 times by 1,723 unique visitors. The Prospectus was downloaded 480 times, and 139 supporting fact sheets were downloaded. Over 100 submissions were made to the website, with respondents representing a range of different interest groups and parts of the community.

DEECA prepared a *Closing the Loop* report in response to the feedback received that was published on the <u>Engage Victoria</u> website in September 2024. The report summarises findings and key themes that emerged from the survey responses and submissions, and changes made in response to community feedback. These changes consisted of minor adjustments to the Prospectus principles for water recovery, and actions that address community concerns, such as the use of reconfiguration powers. Several actions also focus on working more closely with communities, including partnering with Traditional Owners. Methods to be used for future engagement are also considered based on community feedback.

Implementation of the Prospectus

DEECA has applied for Commonwealth funding to develop feasibility studies and business cases for potential water recovery initiatives across northern Victoria. If successful, DEECA and its delivery partners will work with local stakeholders and Traditional Owners in each Basin catchment and irrigation district in Victoria to develop options and build in local knowledge. Potential initiatives have been outlined in a Next Steps report, available on the Engage Victoria website. The funding application includes Business Case development for the Broken System Reconfiguration initiative.

Broken Reconfiguration Feasibility Study

The Broken Reconfiguration Feasibility Study (BRFS) is an example of the community-centred approach to water recovery outlined in the Prospectus. The BFRS commenced in early 2023 based on the recommendations from the Broken Review. It concluded in mid-2024 and has been released publicly by the Minister for Water.

The BRFS was a community-led initiative to explore system reconfiguration options to support the community to plan for the challenges of reduced water availability in the future. The study was overseen by a consultative committee; seven members of which were community members who were selected via an EOI process. The consultative committee met six times over the course of the project to provide community perspectives on the study.

The study team also used a variety of online and face-to-face engagement to gather broader community insights on the Broken System to inform the study. From late-2023 to mid-2024, the team hosted more than 50 activities including briefings, drop-in sessions, kitchen table visits and invited workshops. Across the life of the study, the team heard the views of more than 10 per cent of water users who cumulatively hold 60 per cent of water entitlement in the Broken System.

The project identified a preferred scenario for reconfiguration of the system, comprising a suite of options that will deliver long term benefits to the Broken system and are supported by the community. The preferred scenario for reconfiguration of the system was identified through a multi-criteria assessment and cost-benefit analysis, supported by the data and insights gathered from the community.

The BRFS provides a strong case for progressing this community-led initiative into the next phase of Business Case development, marking a significant step towards realising a more resilient and sustainable Broken system.

The full reports for the BRFS are available at <u>https://www.water.vic.gov.au/for-agriculture-and-industry/irrigation/broken-reconfiguration-feasibility-study</u>.



Image: Minister Shing with the Broken Reconfiguration Feasibility Study Consultative Committee (Credit: J. Lester)

Aboriginal Water Programs

Progress on Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap

Released in September 2022, *Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap* (*Water is Life*) sets out the Victorian government commitments and policy pathways in the short, medium, and long term to increase decision-making and resources for Traditional Owners in the management of water landscapes, as well as increasing Traditional Owner access to water.

Development of *Water is Life* was led by Traditional Owners over 2021 and 2022. It includes 27 Nation Statements prepared by Traditional Owner groups, expressing their cultural and water-related values, goals, aspirations, outcomes, and any other relevant information deemed important by each Nation in their own words.

Water is Life is founded in the Victorian government's recognition of Traditional Owner sovereignty, selfdetermination, and the need for a restorative justice approach to the way water is managed in Victoria. Implementing the 12 Targeted Outcomes within *Water is Life* is a long-term commitment, and one that requires enduring, sustainable change.

During 2023-24 a first report on the progress of *Water is Life* was delivered. A copy can be found here: <u>Water is Life Progress Report April 2024</u>. Progress on many of the short- and medium-term outcomes is well underway as work continues towards achieving genuine, meaningful outcomes for Traditional Owners across the following three themes, with highlights below:

- 1. Increasing Traditional Owners' decision making in caring for water landscapes,
- 2. Returning water for healthy Country, healthy mob and cultural economies, and
- 3. Implementation and accountability.

Highlights from 2023-24 include:

- Progress towards a new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy (VWMS) in partnership with Traditional Owners that incorporates living entity and voice concepts (Outcome 1).
- Drafting of a new Water Corporation Statement of Obligations (General) that incorporates the expectation that water corporations enter formal partnerships with Traditional Owner groups, where Traditional Owners wish to do so.
- Commencing five environmental watering trial sites with Traditional Owners and associated workshops to inform the development of guidelines for Traditional Owner-led Seasonal Watering Proposals.
- Progress towards a draft Public Land Bill to ensure that the renewed legislation advances selfdetermination through greater involvement of Traditional Owners in public land management.
- As of April 2024, increasing the total volume of water returned to Traditional Owners at statewide level as a result of government policy and commitments to 5.2 GL (5,200 megalitres).
- Ongoing work to progress a number of water returns to Traditional Owners across Victoria, including actions outlined in the Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy.
- Authorisation that Parks Victoria land can be nominated by Traditional Owners as a 'point of take' on licence applications, reducing one of the key barriers for Traditional Owners to apply for or hold water entitlements where they may not have landholdings.
- Initiation of a Licensing Review as part of the delivery of Groundwater Management 2030, which will focus on streamlining of licensing instruments as well as identifying opportunities for longer term licensing reform.

- Funding to pay for the fees and charges associated with water entitlements issued to Traditional Owners. In some cases, fees and charges are being waived by the relevant water corporation for entitlements where there are no associated management costs.
- Planning for long-term outcomes that will build on the learnings from short- and medium-term outcomes.
- Discussions with Traditional Owners about avenues for oversight, utilisation of existing forums such as the Caring for Country Partnership Forums, and facilitation of small group and one-on-one meetings with Traditional Owners as requested to ensure oversight of implementation and an adaptive management approach to Water is Life implementation.

Traditional Owner engagement/partnerships

DEECA involvement in Traditional Owner-led projects

- DJAARA's Gatjin (water) Strategy Implementation and Wanggal group: Over 2023-24 DEECA representatives attended six meetings for DJAARA's Wanggal group, previously the Gatjin Strategy Partners Implementation Control Group. The group comprises representatives from government and water sector agencies with responsibilities over water on Djandak (Djaara Country). Representatives work collaboratively withe DJAARA and DJAARA's Kapa Gatjin (DJAARA's water knowledge holder group) to provide strategic guidance, coordination and oversight for implementation of Dhelkunyangu Gatjin (Gatjin Strategy).
- Taungurung's Corop Wetlands Cultural Waterscape Project: Over 2023-24 DEECA representatives have contributed to the Strategic Leadership Group for Taungurung Land and Waters Council's (TLaWC) Corop Wetlands Cultural Waterscape Project. DEECA representatives participated in co-design and planning workshops which helped establish collaborative governance arrangements for the management of the Corop Cultural Waterscape. Key government and water sector partners working alongside TLaWC include DEECA, the Victorian Environmental Water Holder, Goulburn Broken CMA and Goulburn Murray Water.

DEECA-led projects

Victorian Waterway Management Strategy (VWMS) renewal: Over 2023-24 DEECA representatives have held one-on-one meetings, regional discussions (groups and individual), online drop-in sessions and presented to other existing forums to ensure Traditional Owners inform the development of the next VWMS. Traditional Owners have provided clear advice on the principles and commitments they would like to see in the new VWMS, including strengthening Traditional Owner capacity and self-determination in caring for waterways, recognition of Traditional Owner rights in waterway management and significant advancements in waterway partnerships, governance and decision-making over the next 10 years. Traditional Owners, CMAs and other partners will provide comment on a VWMS Partner's Draft that will inform the development of a revised draft VWMS for public consultation in late 2024.

Traditional Owner employment and grants

• Victoria's Aboriginal Water Program: Continued investment in Victoria's Aboriginal Water Program through the Water, Country and Community Program grants saw \$18.5m in funding over 2020-24 for Aboriginal Water Officer positions and Traditional Owner-led water projects and initiatives. As of 2024, the program has provided funding for 24 Aboriginal Water Officer positions across Victoria. The Victorian government has invested \$34.6 million in Victoria's Aboriginal Water Program since 2016.

- Aboriginal Water Officers: Aboriginal Water Officers continue to play a significant role in leading Traditional Owner water priorities and projects across Victoria. They contribute to the delivery of environmental, cultural, spiritual and economic outcomes for Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians; strengthen capacity of Traditional Owners to participate in water management; support increased Aboriginal access to water and work collaboratively with water managers to include Aboriginal values and ecological knowledge in waterway management and planning. In 2023-2024, there were 14 Aboriginal Water Officer roles funded in the Victorian Murray-Darling Basin through the Victorian Aboriginal Water Program to lead and support water priorities of Traditional Owners.
- Traditional Owner Flood Recovery Grants Program: The Victorian Government (DEECA) established an emergency recovery program supporting 15 Traditional Owner groups in the Murray-Darling Basin who were affected by the 2022 floods. The program has supported Traditional Owners to undertake priority recovery activities on Country over the past 18 months. The program is now in the final year of delivery, with activities finishing in mid-2025.
- **Board appointments:** Aboriginal representation through board appointments to water sector agencies increased in 2023 to 21 positions held, up from 11 in 2019 and 13 in 2021. This means that 19 out of 28 water sector boards now have an Aboriginal board member. Additionally, to improve boards' decision-making and build a pathway for future Aboriginal board members, DEECA has supported water entities to appoint 21 Independent Aboriginal Delegates to their boards.



Gunbower creek. Image source: Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action