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Stand condition assessment of forests and woodlands of Chowilla Floodplain — 2015



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Acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners of the Murray–Darling Basin

The Murray–Darling Basin Authority acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Owners, and their Nations, of the Murray–Darling Basin, who have a deep cultural, social, environmental, spiritual and economic connection to their lands and waters. The MDBA understands the need for recognition of Traditional Owner knowledge and cultural values in natural resource management associated with the Basin.

The approach of Traditional Owners to caring for the natural landscape, including water, can be expressed in the words of the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations Board:

...As the First Nations peoples (Traditional Owners) we are the knowledge holders, connected to Country and with the cultural authority to share our knowledge. We offer perspectives to balance and challenge other voices and viewpoints. We aspire to owning and managing water to protect our totemic obligations, to carry out our way of life, and to teach our younger generations to maintain our connections and heritage through our law and customs. When Country is happy, our spirits are happy.

This report may contain photographs or quotes by Aboriginal people who have passed away. The use of terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' reflects usage in different communities within the Murray–Darling Basin.

Cover image: Chowilla Floodplain (photo by Arthur Mostead)

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- GHD (Koondrook–Perricoota Forest)
- Murray–Darling Freshwater Research Centre (Barmah Forest, Gunbower Forest, Hattah Lakes and Lindsay–Mulcra–Wallpolla Islands)
- South Australian Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (Chowilla Floodplain).

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- Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority (Barmah Forest)
- North Central Catchment Management Authority (Gunbower Forest)
- Forestry Corporation of New South Wales — Deniliquin (Koondrook–Perricoota Forest)
- Mallee Catchment Management Authority (Hattah Lakes and Lindsay–Mulcra–Wallpolla Islands)
- Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources — Berri and Adelaide (Chowilla Floodplain).

The Living Murray stand condition assessment tool was developed by Shaun Cunningham, Peter Griffioen, Matt White and Ralph MacNally. The Murray–Darling Basin Authority would like to acknowledge the significant contribution made by Shaun Cunningham.

AAM Pty Ltd produced the RapidEye imagery mosaic used in this 2015 stand condition assessment, as well as previous years (2009–14).

The MDBA Geospatial Services Unit, specifically Md. Anisul Islam, undertook the modelling and mapping presented in this report.

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About this report

This report contains the results of an assessment of condition (health) of river red gum and black box forests and woodlands of Chowilla Floodplain, a Living Murray icon site, in 2015. Condition is modelled by The Living Murray stand condition assessment tool (Cunningham, et al., 2014).

Tree condition assessments are also conducted at some icon sites. Readers should note that due to the differences in the methodologies, results from the stand condition assessment do not always correlate to results from the tree condition assessment. For example, stand condition assessments report the average of condition in a 0.25 ha (typically 50 x 50 m) plots while tree condition assessment reports the proportion of trees within transects (n=30 trees per transect) that are in specific condition classes (e.g. % above the ecological target, or % that trigger the management threshold).

The extent of forests and woodlands shown in this report are based on spatial information held by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) Geospatial Services Unit.

Introduction

To provide a consistent assessment of river red gum and black box condition across The Living Murray icon sites, the MDBA provided funding to develop The Living Murray stand condition assessment tool.

The stand condition assessment tool (Cunningham, et al., 2014) uses the relationship between ground surveys of stand condition at monitoring sites and remotely sensed data to predict stand condition across the spatial extent of the icon sites that support river red gum and black box populations, namely:

- Barmah–Millewa Forest
- Gunbower, Koondrook–Perricoota Forests
- Hattah Lakes
- Lindsay–Mulcra–Wallpolla Islands
- Chowilla Floodplain
- River Murray Channel.

Stand condition scores as predicted by the model are then mapped across the various forest types and categorised into the following stand condition classes:

- good
- moderate
- poor
- degraded
- severely degraded.

The areas of each vegetation type in each condition class within each icon site are then reported for each year the assessment has been conducted.

The results from the stand condition assessment can then be used to inform the progress towards, or away from, the ecological targets relevant to icon site river red gum and black box condition (health) objectives.

Methods

Stand condition modelling

The stand condition assessment tool (the assessment tool) uses the multi-year model developed by Cunningham, et al. (2014) to model stand condition of The Living Murray icon sites for a given year. The assessment tool calculates the stand condition map from reflectance values derived from RapidEye satellite imagery and a range of spatial variables used to model stand condition. For further information about the assessment tool methodology see Cunningham, et al. (2014).

The RapidEye imagery mosaic for the 2015 stand condition assessment was prepared using RapidEye imagery captured between January and April 2015. The assessment tool was supplied with the mosaic's five spectral bands and run as per the methods outlined in Cunningham & Griffioen (2013).

The assessment tool calculated stand condition from the input variables provided and produced the raster file of 2015 stand condition scores to be viewed and analysed in ArcGIS (ESRI, Redlands, California).

Validation of model outputs

In order to determine how well the model has predicted stand condition, a validation survey of stand condition using ground-based assessments is undertaken. The validation data provide field observations of stand condition at specific field locations.

The validation feature of the assessment tool allows the checking of the map predictions against the field observations and if necessary adjust the predictions according to the relationship between the surveyed and predicted values.

One hundred and fifty field locations were assessed across all of the icon sites between January and April 2015 as per the methods outlined in *Ground-based survey methods for The Living Murray assessment of condition of river red gum and black box populations* (MDBA, 2012). Field validation sites were selected in 2009 by Cunningham et al. (2009). Sites were chosen to be representative of the range of forest types, forest condition and landscape positions (e.g. riverine, wetland and floodplain) at each icon site.

The field validation data was input to the assessment tool and correlated to the initial modelled values. The accuracy of the model's predictions of condition were assessed by determining if the linear fit (i.e. the correlation value) was >0.77 (which equates to an $R^2 > 0.6$).

Confirmation that the $R^2 > 0.6$, does not necessarily mean the model is predicting the observed values accurately. Therefore, additional tests are applied to determine if:

- the offset (i.e. the regression intercept) is between -1 and +1
- the scalar (i.e. the regression slope) is between 0.8 and 1.2.

If the offset or scalar values are outside of the ranges outlined above, the predicted stand condition values do not correlate well with field observations and would benefit from a post-process adjustment (using an inverse-linear regression) being applied (Cunningham, et al., 2014).

Map analysis

Maps of the stand condition assessments are produced for The Living Murray icon sites using ArcGIS. The assessment tool predicts a stand condition score that is based on the variables: percentage live basal area; plant area index; and crown extent. Values of the stand condition score range between 0 (dead) to 10 (excellent condition).

For reporting purposes, the maps are then classified into five condition classes: good, moderate, poor, degraded and severely degraded (see Table 1) using ArcGIS.

Table 1: Classification of stand condition score to condition categories.

Stand condition score range	Condition category
>8 to 10	good
>6 to 8	moderate
>4 to 6	poor
>2 to 4	degraded
0 to 2	severely degraded

To enable reporting of stand condition for the various forest and woodland types that exist within The Living Murray icon sites, distribution maps were created for the following six forest types:

- river red gum forest — stands dominated by *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* with 30–45% projective foliage cover¹
- river red gum woodland — stands dominated by *E. camaldulensis* with 20–25% projective foliage cover
- river red gum/black box woodland — mixed stand of *E. camaldulensis* and *E. largiflorens*
- black box woodland — stands dominated by *E. largiflorens*
- river red gum/box woodland — stands dominated by *E. camaldulensis*, *E. largiflorens* and *E. microcarpa* included in Millewa and Koondrook–Perricoota forests only
- box woodland — stands dominated by *E. largiflorens* and *E. microcarpa* included in Millewa and Koondrook–Perricoota forests only.

Distribution maps were developed from the sources described in Table 2. The forest type distribution for Chowilla Floodplain is presented in Map 1.

Proportions and area (in hectares) of each forest type in each condition class were then determined from the attribute table of the stand condition shapefile and reported in the results section of this report.²

¹ Projective foliage cover is the percentage of ground area occupied by the vertical projection of the foliage of woody vegetation.

² Total areas for each icon site and forest type provided in the results section may vary slightly between assessments due to data transformation and combining vector data (forest types) and raster data (stand condition).

Table 2: Information sources used to map forest type distribution (from Cunningham et al. (2009))

Region	Map	Source
Barmah Forest	Ecological vegetation community (EVC)	Dept. Sustainability and Environment (Victoria)
	State forest resource inventory (SFRI)	Dept. Sustainability and Environment (Victoria)
Millewa Forest	State Forest NSW map	Forests NSW
Gunbower Island	Ecological vegetation community (EVC)	Dept. Sustainability and Environment (Victoria)
	State Forest Resource Inventory (SFRI)	Dept. Sustainability and Environment (Victoria)
Koondrook & Perricoota	State Forest NSW map	Forests NSW
Hattah Lakes	Ecological vegetation community (EVC)	Dept. Sustainability and Environment (Victoria)
	State forest resource inventory (SFRI)	Dept. Sustainability and Environment (Victoria)
Lindsay–Mulcra–Wallpolla Islands	Ecological vegetation community (EVC)	Dept. Sustainability and Environment (Victoria)
	State forest resource inventory (SFRI)	Dept. Sustainability and Environment (Victoria)
Chowilla Floodplain	Vegetation of Chowilla floodplain	CSIRO Land and Water
River Murray Channel (NSW and SA)	Riparian vegetation of the River Murray	Murray–Darling Basin Commission — Margules and others
River Murray Channel (Vic)	Ecological vegetation community (EVC)	Dept. Sustainability and Environment (Victoria)

Results

Model validation and correction

The initial model predictions of stand condition scores for 2015 were highly correlated ($R^2=0.79$) with the observations from the field validation surveys across the icon sites. However, the offset (regression intercept) and the scalar (regression slope) of the validation relationship indicated that the initial scores under-represented the number of good condition and degraded condition sites. This result is similar to stand condition assessments in previous years (Cunningham, et al., 2014; Cunningham, et al., 2011; Cunningham, et al., 2009).

Therefore, as per the method outlined in Cunningham and Griffioen (2013) an adjustment was applied to the initial stand condition scores to improve the accuracy at the extreme ends of the condition spectrum. The correlation between the adjusted stand condition scores and field observations from the validation surveys is presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

It is noted that in conducting this assessment at the whole of The Living Murray scale (i.e. 14,037 km²) across years and different forest types, a perfect match between field observations and stand condition scores at the pixel scale (0.000625 km²) does not always occur.

The correlation between model predictions and observations from the field shows that whilst different forest types have differing levels of accuracy at the pixel scale, the 2015 stand condition assessment provides whole of icon site information on stand condition that is highly correlated with field observations. These results are suitable for informing the progress towards, or away from, the ecological targets relevant to icon site river red gum and black box condition.

The adjusted stand condition scores, classified into stand condition classes per Table 1, have been used to produce the statistics and mapping presented in this report.

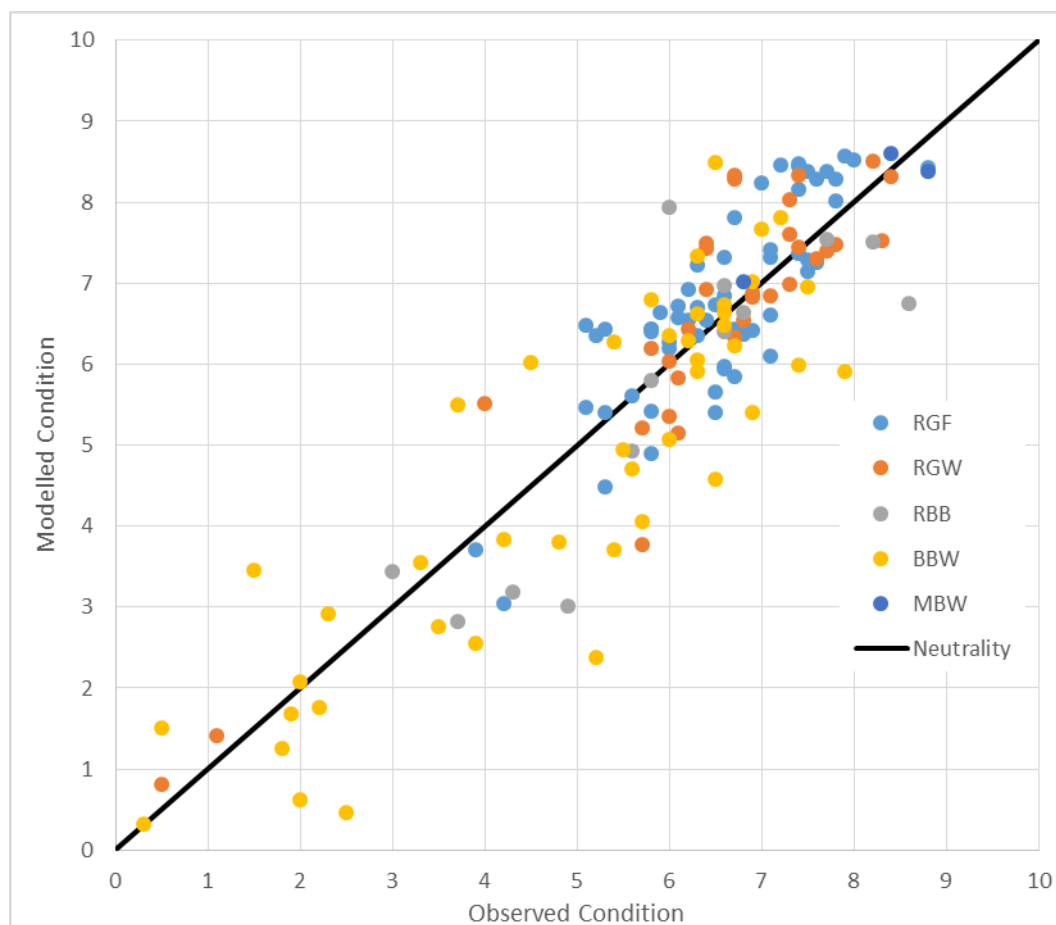


Figure 1: Relationship between predicted and observed condition and for 150 validation sites across all The Living Murray icon sites. Forest types are black box woodland (BBW), mixed box woodlands (MBW), mixed river red gum and black box woodlands (RBB), river red gum forests (RGF) and river red gum woodlands (RGW).

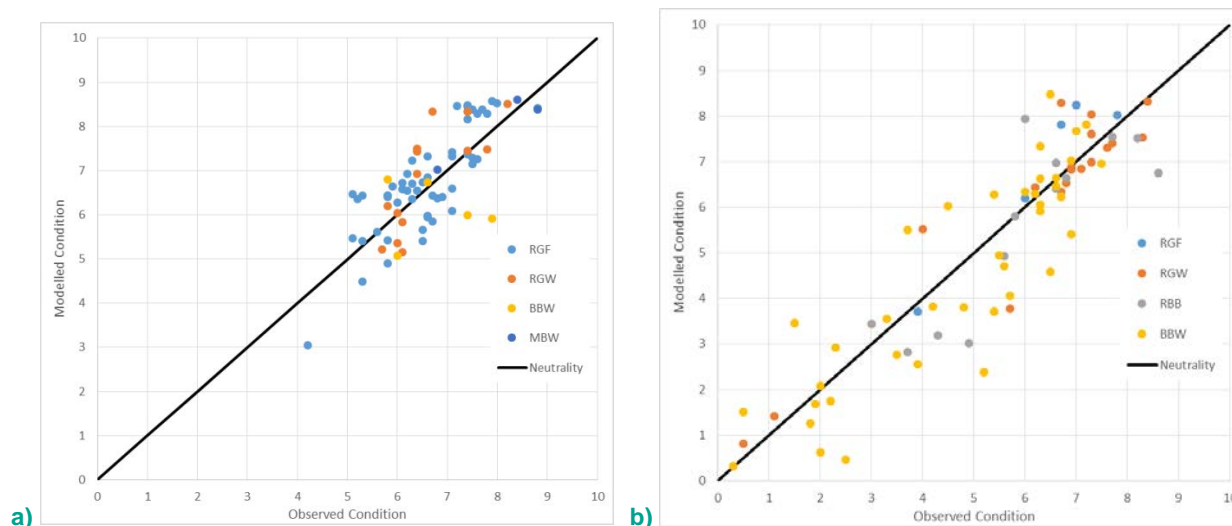


Figure 2: Relationship between predicted and observed condition for validation sites in the riverina ($n=75$) (a) and mallee ($n=75$) (b) bioregions. Forest types are black box woodland (BBW), mixed box woodlands (MBW), mixed river red gum and black box woodlands (RBB), river red gum forests (RGF) and river red gum woodlands (RGW).

Stand condition assessment

Table 3 provides the results of the 2015 stand condition assessment for Chowilla Floodplain. Spatial extent of each condition class is presented in Map 2.

In 2015, 6.3% (290 ha) of the forests and woodlands of Chowilla Floodplain are considered in good condition. A further 23.5% (1,076 ha) of the forests are considered to be in moderate condition. The remaining areas of floodplain forests are considered to be in poor (8.2%), degraded (44.3%) or severely degraded (17.6%) condition — the total area in these condition classes is about 3,206 ha.

Table 3: Percentage of the total forest and woodland and estimated area (ha) within Chowilla Floodplain in each condition class in 2015 as predicted by the stand condition assessment tool.

Category	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded
% of forest area in each condition class	6.3	23.5	8.2	44.3	17.6
Estimated area in hectares (ha)	290	1,076	374	2,027	805

Historical comparisons of icon site proportions in each stand condition class are provided in Table 4.

Table 4: Historical comparison of the percentage of the total forest and woodland and estimated area (ha) within Chowilla Floodplain in each condition class as predicted by the stand condition assessment tool.

Year	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded
% of forest area 2009	11.7	20.9	10.8	42.4	14.2
% of forest area 2010	7.2	24.4	7.3	46.5	14.5
% of forest area 2011	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed
% of forest area 2012	10.7	21.8	9.7	43.6	14.1
% of forest area 2013	9.4	23.0	9.4	41.8	16.5
% of forest area 2014	8.7	23.5	8.4	41.5	17.9
% of forest area 2015	6.3	23.5	8.2	44.3	17.6
Estimated area (ha) 2009	535	954	492	1,939	651
Estimated area (ha) 2010	330	1,116	334	2,128	663
Estimated area (ha) 2011	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed
Estimated area (ha) 2012	491	997	442	1,994	647
Estimated area (ha) 2013	427	1,051	428	1,910	754
Estimated area (ha) 2014	399	1,073	383	1,899	818
Estimated area (ha) 2015	290	1,076	374	2,027	805

The stand condition assessment results for each forest type within Chowilla Floodplain are presented in Table 5.

Spatial extents of each condition class, within each forest type are presented in Maps 3 to 6. Stand condition assessment results for previous years are provided in Appendix 1.

River red gum forest has 158 ha (30.5%) in good condition. The remaining areas are predominantly in moderate condition 239 ha (46.2%), with about 23.3% (121 ha) of the river red gum forest area is considered to be in poor, degraded or severely degraded condition.

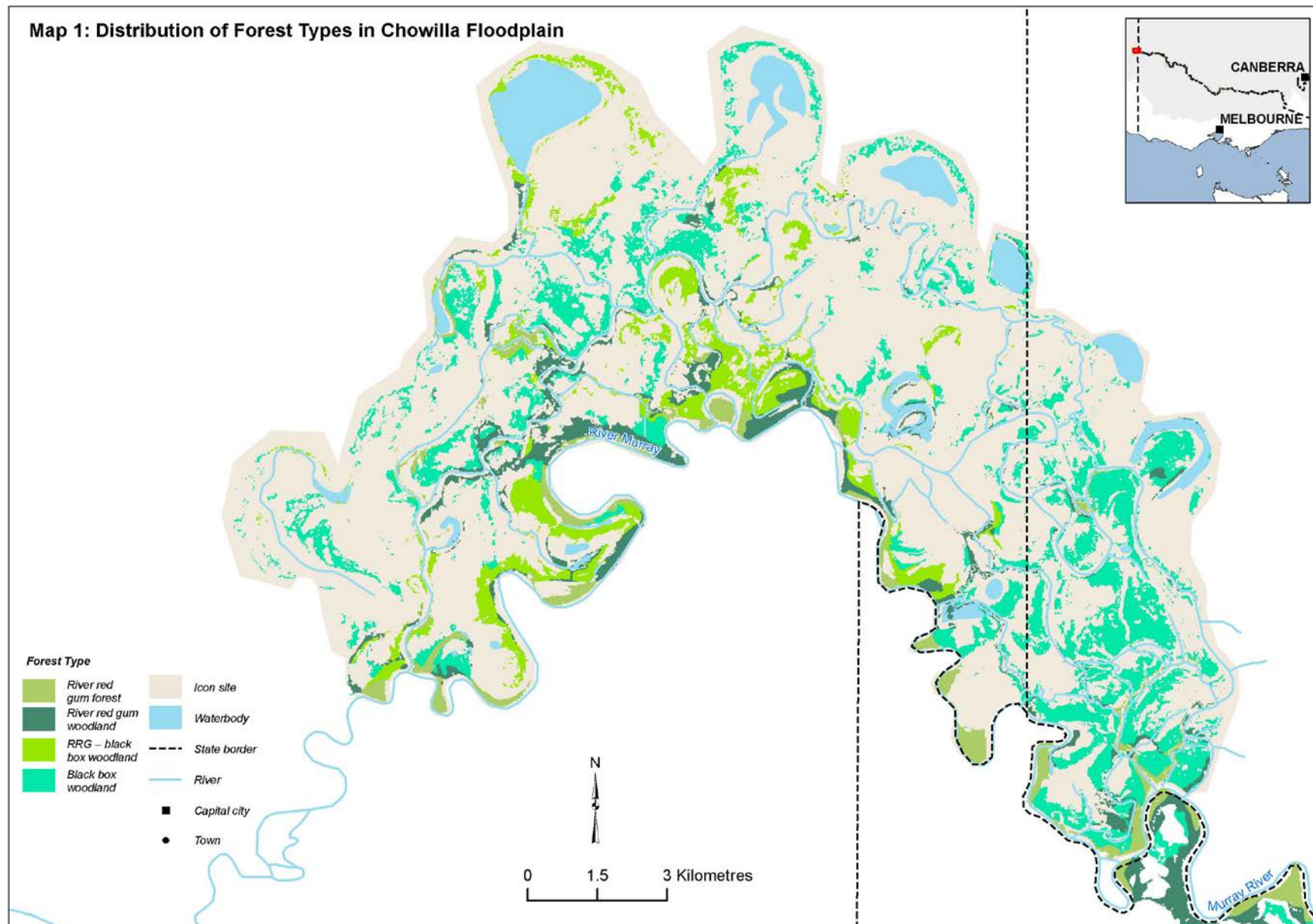
River red gum woodlands are predominantly in moderate condition (40.1%), with a lower proportion of stands considered to be in good condition 12.2% (86 ha). A further 9.0% of the forests are predicted to be in poor condition. A relatively large proportion of the river red gum woodland areas are classified as being in degraded condition (26.0%) with a further 12.6% classified as severely degraded.

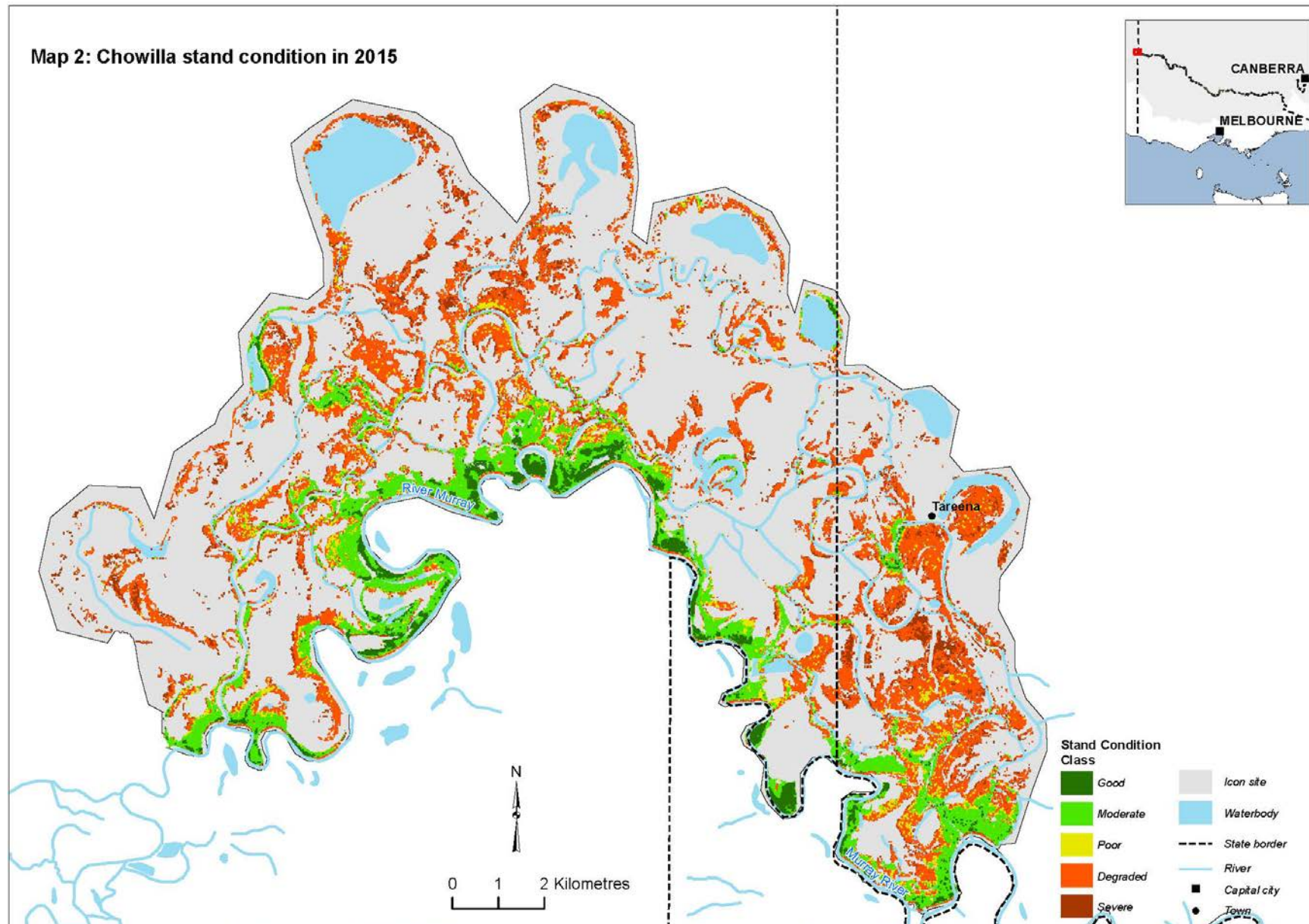
Mixed river red gum and black box woodlands are predominantly in moderate condition (31.0%) or degraded condition (39.7%). About 3.1% (30 ha) of the area of river red gum-black box woodlands was predicted to be in good condition.

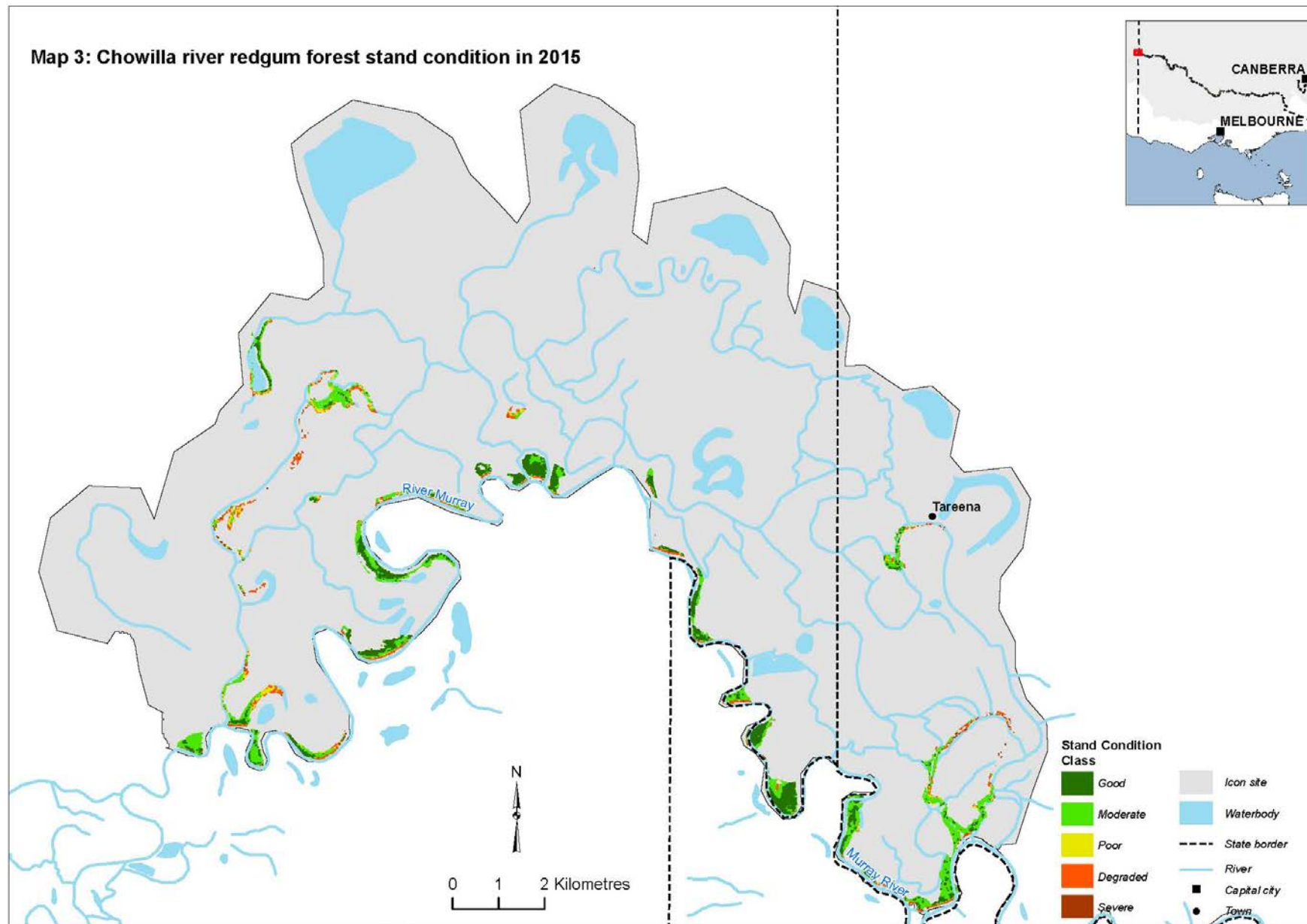
Pure black box woodlands are generally in degraded (58.9%) or severely degraded (22.7%) condition with only 0.7% (16 ha) of the area predicted to be in good condition and a further 10.6% (253 ha) of the area classed as moderate.

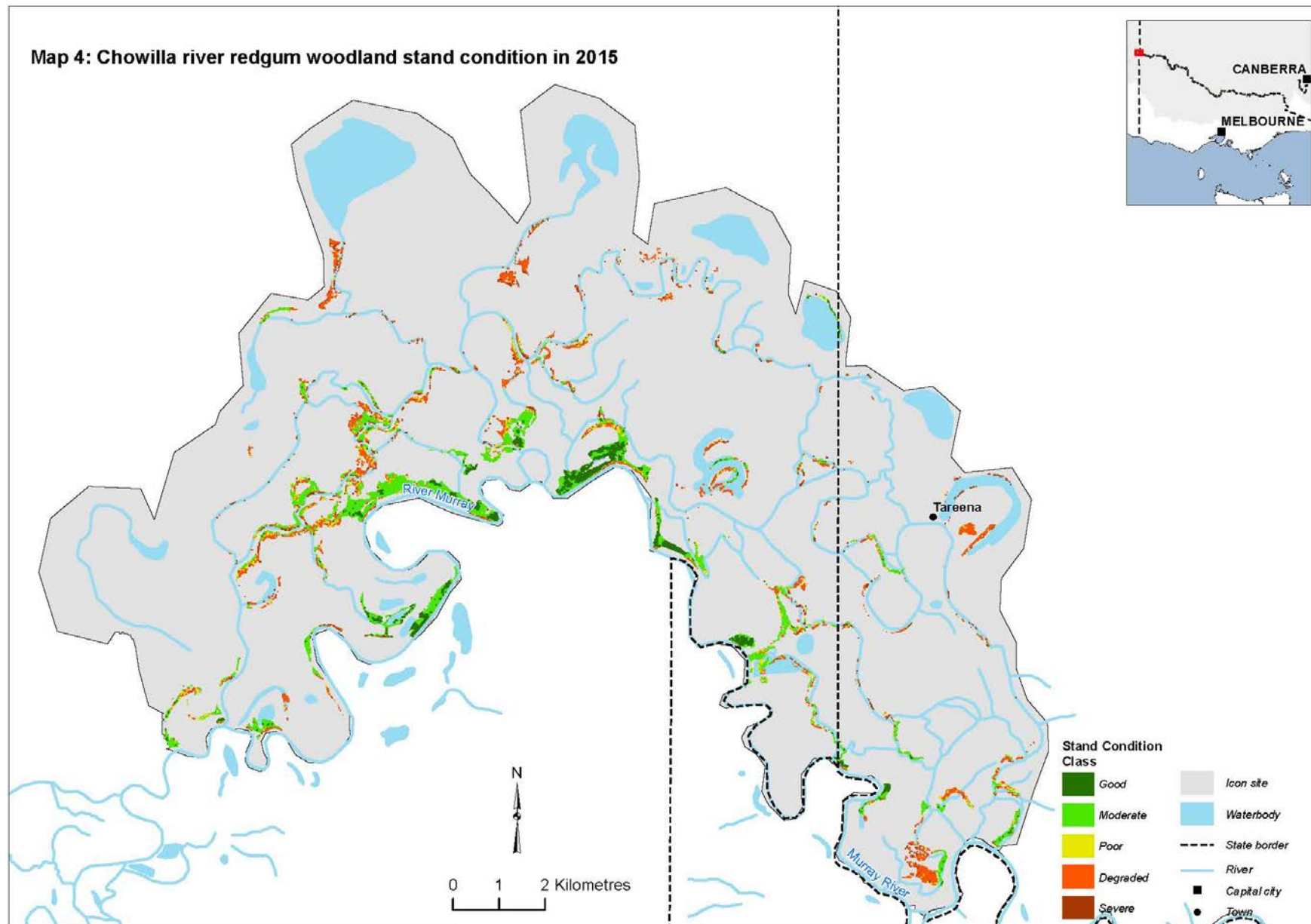
Table 5: Proportion and estimated area of each forest type in each condition class in 2015 as predicted by the stand condition assessment tool.

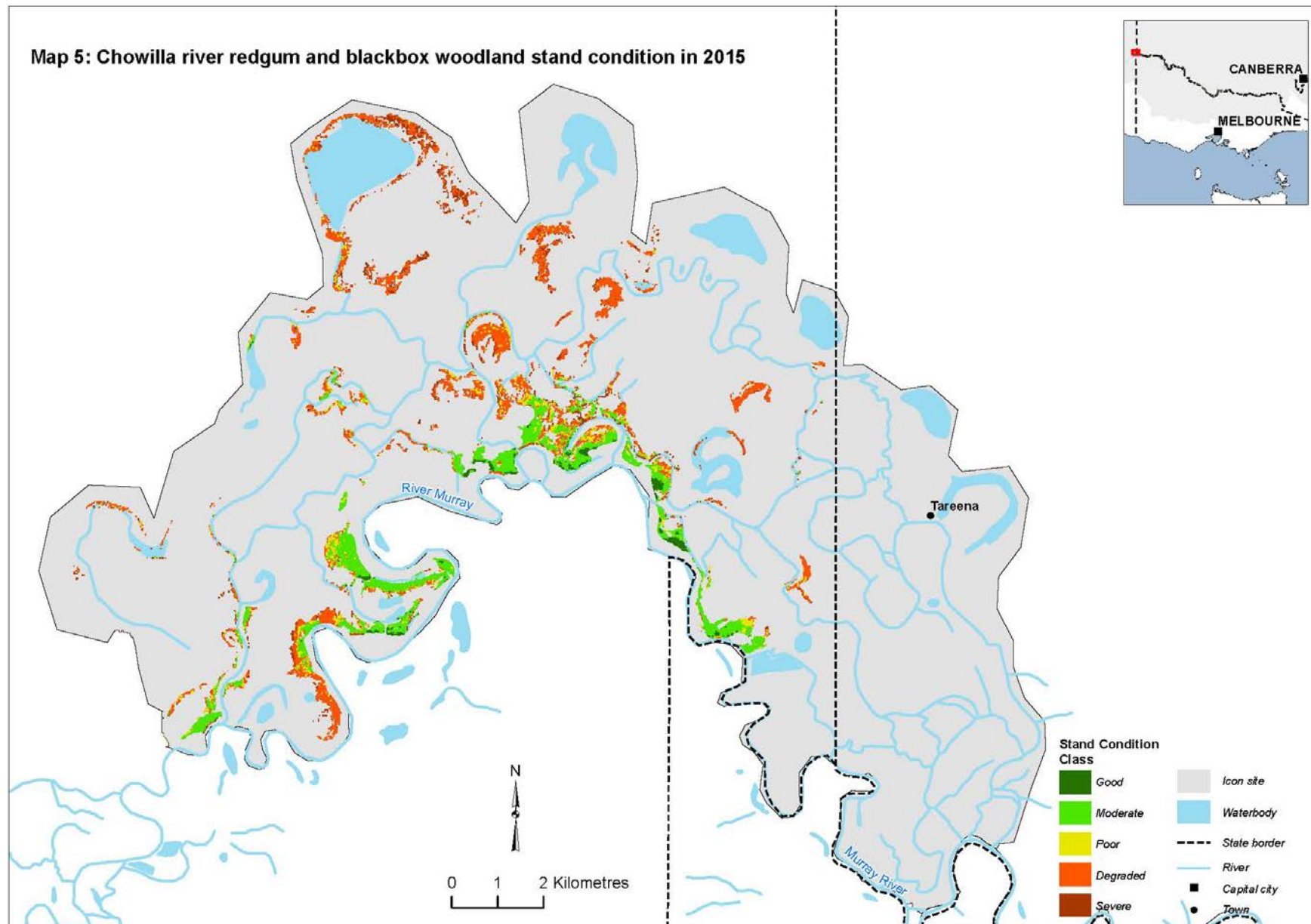
Category	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded
% of river red gum forest area	30.5	46.2	5.8	11.3	6.2
% of river red gum woodland area	12.2	40.1	9.0	26.0	12.6
% of river red gum – black box woodland area	3.1	31.0	11.4	39.7	14.8
% of black box woodland area	0.7	10.6	7.1	58.9	22.7
Estimated area of river red gum forest (ha)	158	239	30	59	32
Estimated area of river red gum woodland (ha)	86	284	64	184	89
Estimated area of river red gum – black box woodland (ha)	30	299	111	384	143
Estimated area of black box woodland (ha)	16	253	170	1,400	540

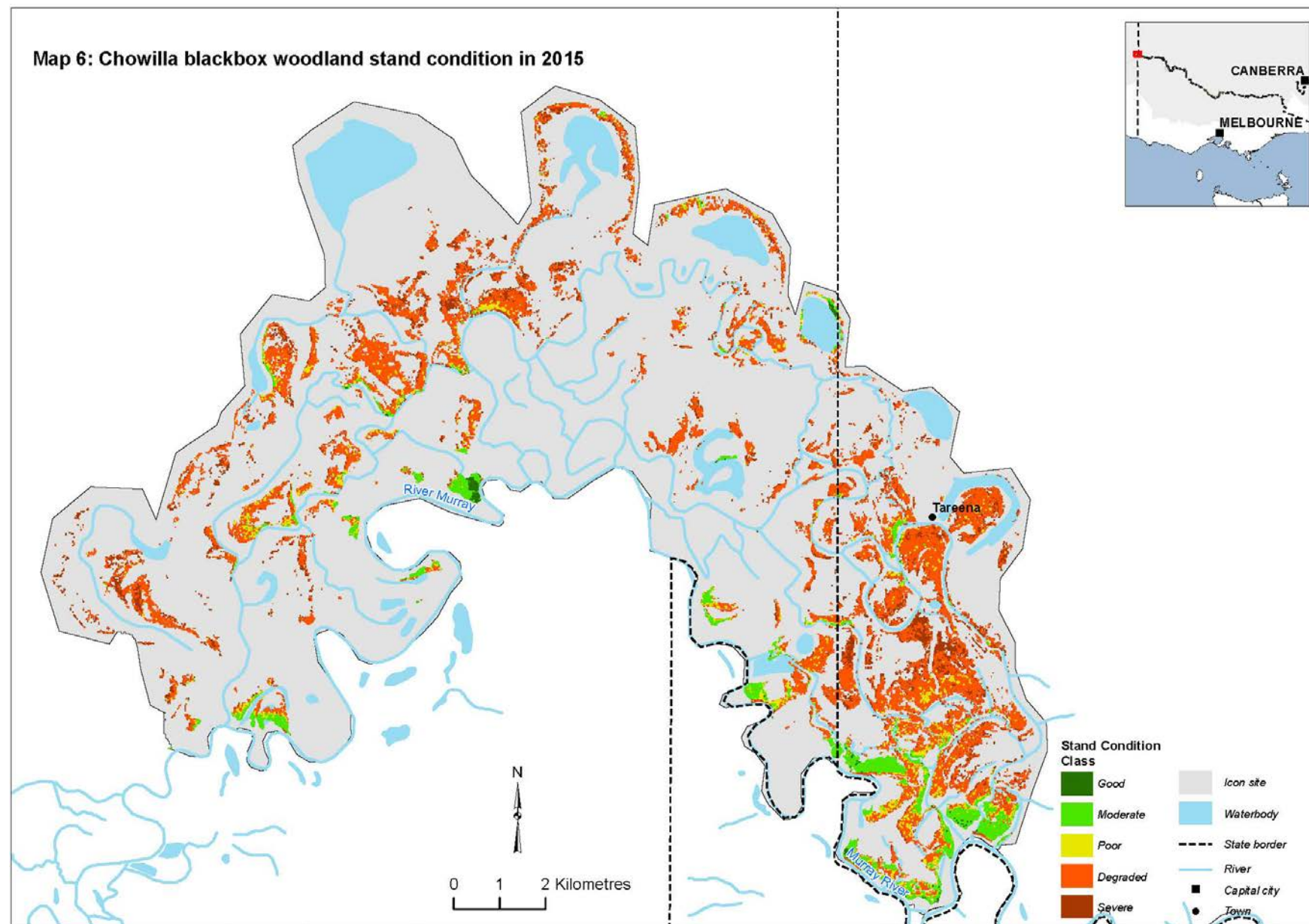












Further information

The following spatial data are available by forwarding a request to gis@mdba.gov.au:

- forest type mapping used in The Living Murray stand condition assessment
- stand condition assessment maps for all years (2009, 2010, 2012–15).

All products can be supplied as whole of The Living Murray (i.e. icon sites including the River Murray Channel) or clipped to areas of interest (where specifications are provided within the data request).

For further details on the validation of model results, RapidEye imagery used in the assessment or any other questions on the stand condition assessment please email

TLMMonitoring@mdba.gov.au.

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Cunningham, S. & Griffioen, P., 2013. *Murray Stand Condition Tool User's Guide*, Canberra: Murray–Darling Basin Authority.

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MDBA, 2012. *Ground-based survey methods for The Living Murray assessment of condition of river red gum and black box populations*, Canberra: Murray–Darling Basin Authority.

Appendix 1

Stand condition assessment results for Chowilla Floodplain — 2009 to 2015

Table A1: River red gum forest.

Year	Area in condition class (ha)					Proportion in condition class (%)				
	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded
2009	214	195	26	52	30	41.4	37.7	5.1	10.0	5.9
2010	167	237	23	59	32	32.3	45.7	4.5	11.3	6.2
2011	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2012	230	178	24	54	32	44.5	34.4	4.6	10.5	6.1
2013	202	206	25	53	31	39.1	39.8	4.9	10.3	6.0
2014	193	215	23	55	32	37.2	41.5	4.5	10.7	6.2
2015	158	239	30	59	32	30.5	46.2	5.8	11.3	6.2

Table A2: River red gum woodland.

Year	Area in condition class (ha)					Proportion in condition class (%)				
	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded
2009	176	222	61	169	80	24.9	31.4	8.6	23.8	11.2
2010	101	285	48	188	86	14.3	40.2	6.8	26.6	12.2
2011	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2012	156	239	57	170	85	22.1	33.8	8.0	24.1	12.0
2013	136	257	64	166	84	19.2	36.4	9.0	23.5	11.9
2014	127	263	56	172	89	18.0	37.2	7.9	24.4	12.6
2015	86	284	64	184	89	12.2	40.1	9.0	26.0	12.6

Table A3: River red gum – black box woodland.

Year	Area in condition class (ha)					Proportion in condition class (%)				
	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded
2009	109	268	126	349	115	11.2	27.8	13.0	36.1	11.9
2010	44	323	77	388	135	4.6	33.4	8.0	40.2	13.9
2011	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2012	71	305	102	368	119	7.4	31.6	10.6	38.1	12.4
2013	61	315	115	352	123	6.3	32.6	12.0	36.5	12.7
2014	51	321	89	361	144	5.3	33.3	9.2	37.4	15.0
2015	30	299	111	384	143	3.1	31.0	11.4	39.7	14.8

Table A4: Black box woodland.

Year	Area in condition class (ha)					Proportion in condition class (%)				
	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded	Good	Moderate	Poor	Degraded	Severely degraded
2009	36	268	279	1,370	426	1.5	11.3	11.7	57.6	17.9
2010	18	272	1,86	1,493	410	0.8	11.4	7.8	62.8	17.2
2011	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2012	33	275	260	1,401	411	1.4	11.5	10.9	58.9	17.3
2013	28	273	224	1,338	516	1.2	11.5	9.4	56.2	21.7
2014	28	273	215	1,310	552	1.2	11.5	9.0	55.1	23.2
2015	16	253	170	1400	540	0.7	10.6	7.1	58.9	22.7