

**10
Year**

Strategy

2023 to 2033



Acknowledgement of Victoria's Traditional Owners

The Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH) proudly acknowledges Victoria's Traditional Owners and their rich culture and pays our respect to Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

The VEWH sees the meaningful intersection between the aims of the environmental watering program – healthy waterways, healthy communities – and the deep and enduring obligations Traditional Owners have to Country and to Aboriginal people. We deeply value the ongoing contribution that Traditional Owners and Aboriginal knowledge systems are making to planning and managing water for the environment. We recognise that this contribution is largely through frameworks and processes that have not been determined by Traditional Owners, and contribution does not imply endorsement of those frameworks and processes. More can be done to increase Traditional Owners' power and agency and enable progress towards self-determination within the environmental watering program.

Adequately recognising and strengthening the rights of Traditional Owners in water management is critical for achieving self-determination and healthy waterways into the future. The VEWH is committed to an active role in supporting and enabling this within its power and capability.

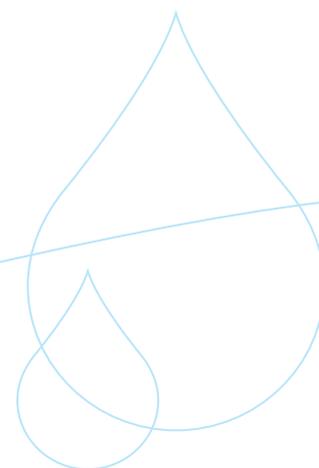


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- Front cover: *Kids by the Campaspe River*, by Victoria Penko
- Previous page: *Dhudhuroa and Waywuru Aboriginal Waterways Assessment (AWA) on the Ovens and King rivers*, by Murray-Darling Basin Authority.



1. Executive summary

2021 marked 10 years since the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH) was established to bring greater accountability, transparency, independence and coordination to Victoria's environmental watering program.

We are proud of what we have achieved in our first decade, building strong relationships with partners and stakeholders¹, and collectively implementing rigorous planning and reporting processes and overseeing delivery of 6.7 million megalitres of water for the environment across the State to improve waterway health and protect over 120 species.

This 10-year milestone prompted reflection within the VEWH on how Victoria's environmental watering program and its context have evolved and where we would like it to be in another 10 years' time. By developing this 10-year strategy, the VEWH has:

- identified significant key challenges, our strategic priorities to address these and our aspirations for where we will be in 10 years' time
- outlined a pathway to guide the VEWH's investment and effort into strategic priorities
- achieved internal alignment across Commission, Executive and staff in a shared vision and strategic direction
- provided a means to communicate and align our longer-term strategic priorities to partners and stakeholders.

There are key challenges facing the environmental watering program as a whole and the community more broadly: lack of water justice for Traditional Owners; continued waterway health degradation; and the impacts of climate change.

This 10-year strategy outlines the part the VEWH has to play in addressing these challenges, whether it be to lead, partner or influence, and what outcomes we are working towards in doing so. The VEWH's contribution to addressing these challenges in the environmental watering program complements the efforts of our program partners in the context of broader integrated catchment management and water resource management frameworks. Our strategic priorities from 2023 to 2033 are:

1. Supporting Traditional Owner self-determination
2. Optimising environmental and community benefits
3. Enhancing landscape-scale outcomes
4. Demonstrating and communicating outcomes
5. Adapting to climate change.

A summary of the VEWH 10-year strategy is shown at Figure 1.

Ultimately, healing and caring for our precious rivers and wetlands is a life-long commitment. With the passion and dedication of all those involved in the environmental watering program and with the support of community members, we will maintain and build on the benefits healthy rivers and wetlands provide for everyone to enjoy.

¹ Partners in the environmental watering program are those with some implementation responsibility, including policy makers, increasingly Traditional Owners, other environmental water holders, waterway managers, storage managers, land managers and scientists. Stakeholders are those organisations or individuals with an interest in the environmental watering program.

Figure 1: Summary of the corporate vision, challenges and strategic priorities of the VEWH



Summary of actions

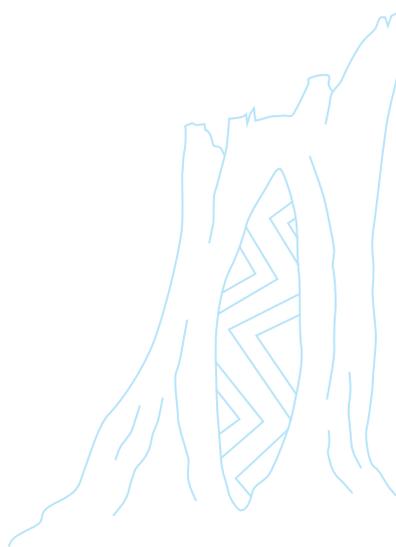
Priority 1: Supporting Traditional Owner self-determination

Actions	VEWH role
We will create an informed, respectful, and culturally safe environment within the VEWB and the broader environmental watering program, through respectful and inclusive policies and procedures, culturally appropriate publications content and cultural competency training and guidance for staff.	Lead
We will evolve our operational practices to provide opportunities for Traditional Owner empowerment in planning, decision-making, delivery and monitoring of water for the environment on Country, through meaningful relationships, understanding Traditional Owner objectives, and watering sites of ecological and cultural significance.	Partner
We will identify and deconstruct barriers to increase Traditional Owner self-determination within the current environmental watering program.	Partner
We will support increased Aboriginal decision-making, leadership and self-governance around water management and rights, through government policy input and implementation, knowledge sharing and supporting the development of future Aboriginal water leaders.	Partner / influence

Outcomes by 2033

The VEWB has supported achievement of Traditional Owner self-determined objectives relating to water for the environment.

Traditional Owners have agency and power in environmental watering decisions.



Priority 2: Optimising environmental and community benefits

Actions	VEWH role
<p>We will contribute to the development and implementation of government policy, strategies and infrastructure projects that address continued waterway health degradation, to enhance environmental watering outcomes and ensure effective integration of environmental watering with broader catchment management activities, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainable Water Strategies - renewal of the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy - constraints relaxation - clarifying delivery rights for water for the environment. 	<p>Influence / partner</p>
<p>We will refine our trade and revenue investment framework to optimise outcomes through strategic investment and we will assess opportunities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - use the water grid to move water to where it is needed most - purchase (temporary) allocations and/or seek substitution arrangements to address critical watering needs at priority waterways - sell (temporary) water allocation to fund strategic projects and/or complementary works (after priority watering demands are able to be met or where revenue investment provides greater environmental outcomes than water delivery). 	<p>Lead</p>
<p>We will work with Traditional Owners, either directly or through waterway managers as self-determined by Traditional Owners, with their free, prior and informed consent, to better consider cultural knowledge in decisions around water for the environment.</p>	<p>Partner</p>
<p>We will improve how delivery of water for the environment provides recreational, social and economic benefits by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - inputting to waterway manager planning - considering the outcomes of community consultation undertaken by waterway managers - continuing to directly engage statewide and peak body stakeholders. 	<p>Partner / influence</p>

Outcomes by 2033
<p>Environmental outcomes are optimised through robust decisions about water for the environment and effective integration with broader land and water management actions.</p>
<p>Critical watering needs at priority waterways are met.</p>
<p>The VEWH has strategically used available water trade revenue to fund priority strategic projects and programs which optimise enduring environmental benefits.</p>
<p>The community's enjoyment, experience and connection to waterways is enhanced through the use of water for the environment.</p>

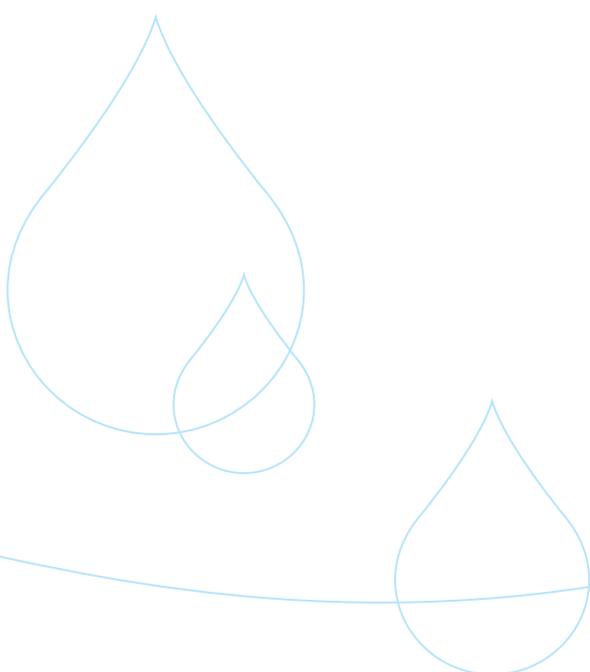
Priority 3: Enhancing landscape-scale outcomes

Actions	VEWH role
We will work with partners to evolve our understanding of and delivery of landscape-scale outcomes	Partner
We will fund pilot scientific studies to improve the knowledge base for ecological assets or processes at a landscape-scale	Lead
We will collaborate with Traditional Owners to incorporate cultural landscape thinking to inform our decisions	Partner
We will input our operational knowledge during the inclusion of landscape-scale concepts in policies and strategies such as the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy and regional catchment and waterway strategies	Influence
We will advocate for and complement monitoring, modelling and research projects and programs to assess ecological responses at a landscape-scale	Influence / partner / lead
We will advocate for and where possible co-invest in complementary works and strategic projects to optimise outcomes at a landscape-scale.	Influence / partner

Outcomes by 2033

Environmental watering decisions are optimising outcomes at a landscape-scale, based on an established scientific and cultural knowledge base and frameworks.

Water is being delivered to sites/systems that have been prioritised to reflect landscape-scale processes or values to improve environmental outcomes and adapt to climate change.



Priority 4: Demonstrating and communicating outcomes

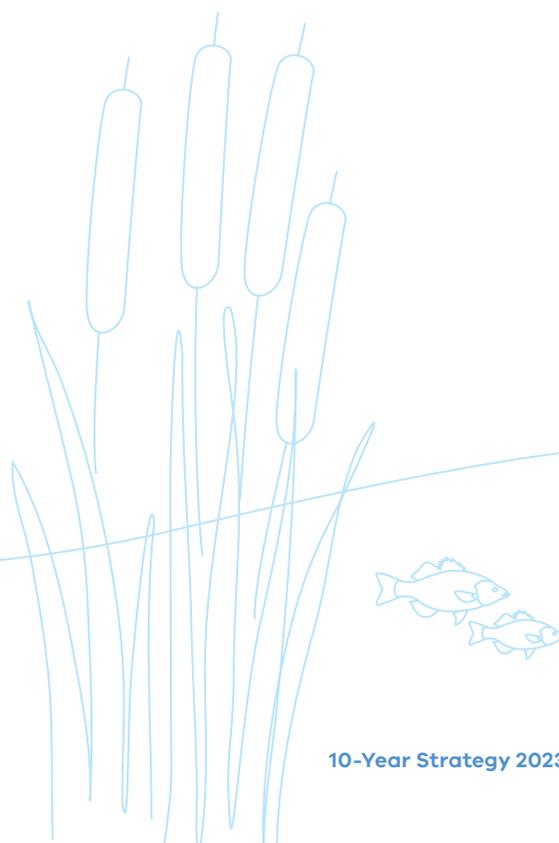
Actions	VEWH role
We will contribute to Victorian and Commonwealth Government monitoring and knowledge programs to advise on our information needs to report on water for the environment outcomes.	Influence
We will complement Victorian and Commonwealth Government monitoring and knowledge programs by investing in event-based or short-term projects that demonstrate compliance and communicate outcomes at both site and landscape-scales.	Partner / lead
We will build on existing communication and reporting of environmental outcomes, including by consolidating the knowledge gained from monitoring and research.	Partner / lead
We will demonstrate how our work contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in our corporate plans.	Lead

Outcomes by 2033

The site-based and landscape-scale outcomes from water for the environment across multiple years are demonstrated and communicated.

Interested stakeholders understand the environmental and associated recreational, social and economic benefits of the environmental watering program.

The VEWH has contributed to improvements in global sustainability.



Priority 5: Adapting to climate change

Actions	VEWH role
<p>We will respond to climate change by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - assessing the risk of climate change to our water holdings under a range of different scenarios and managing those risks - inputting to the update of existing government policy for environmental watering objective setting to consider climate change - preparing for and inputting to dry inflow contingency plans (for high-risk systems) - contributing to the development and implementation of government policy and projects that address climate change challenges, such as Sustainable Water Strategies, the renewal of the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy and the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project. 	<p>Lead / partner</p> <p>Influence</p> <p>Influence</p> <p>Influence</p>
<p>We will work with our partners to understand, manage and communicate the carbon emission impacts and carbon storage benefits associated with management of water for the environment.</p>	<p>Partner</p>
<p>We will work with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) to assess, reduce and if necessary, offset emissions for all office, vehicle, travel and waste services.</p>	<p>Partner</p>

Outcomes by 2033

Our planning and decision-making optimise outcomes in the face of climate change.

Contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 13 Climate Action by achieving net zero emissions for all office, vehicle, travel and waste services by 2025.



2. Introduction and purpose of the 10-year strategy

2021 marked 10 years since the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH) was established to bring greater accountability, transparency, independence and coordination to Victoria's environmental watering program.

We are proud of what we have achieved in our first decade, building strong relationships with partners and stakeholders,² and collectively implementing rigorous planning and reporting processes and overseeing delivery of 6.7 million megalitres of water for the environment across the State to improve waterway health and protect over 120 species.

This 10-year milestone prompted reflection within the VEWH on how Victoria's environmental watering program and its context have evolved and where we would like it to be in another 10 years' time. The 10-year strategy is a direction-setting document focusing on the VEWH's strategic priorities to evolve the environmental watering program, where the VEWH has a role to lead, influence and partner. By developing this 10-year strategy, the VEWH has:

- identified significant key challenges, our strategic priorities to address these and our aspirations for where we will be in 10 years' time
- outlined a pathway to guide the VEWH's investment and effort into strategic priorities
- achieved internal alignment across Commission, Executive and staff in a shared vision and strategic direction
- provided a means to communicate and align our longer-term strategic priorities to partners and stakeholders.

Environmental watering is a relatively young discipline (for example, as compared to urban water supply), and there is still much to learn. As such, adaptive management, where new knowledge is used to adapt management approaches, is fundamental to the whole watering program. The VEWH has a culture of continuous improvement that also reflects this need.

The VEWH's statutory obligations are clear, including our role in holding and managing environmental water entitlements, and planning for and reporting on their use. This is what we have to do, and these core business obligations are embedded in the VEWH's annual corporate plan. This 10-year strategy is a direction-setting document that complements the shorter-term strategic planning and operational delivery as described in the corporate plan. It aims to guide how we go about implementing our statutory obligations, and how we evolve this implementation over time to collectively optimise the outcomes achieved and ensure the implementation is relevant and appropriate in addressing significant challenges.

The VEWH will develop an implementation plan to support this strategy, and seek input from relevant partners to ensure roles are clear and agreed. The VEWH Office will report regularly to the VEWH Commission on action implementation.

² Partners in the environmental watering program are those with some implementation responsibility, including policy makers, increasingly Traditional Owners, other environmental water holders, waterway managers, storage managers, land managers and scientists. Stakeholders are those organisations or individuals with an interest in the environmental watering program.

2.1 Why does water for the environment exist?

Water for the environment is critical for healthy waterways, and healthy waterways are in turn critical for healthy communities.

The VEWH holds environmental water entitlements, a relatively small but critical component of the broader Environmental Water Reserve, which was legislated in 2005. It is the component that can be actively managed and is referred to in this document as ‘water for the environment’. Environmental water entitlements are held in 19 regulated river systems and vary in volume and reliability (ie. in how much water is allocated to them each year).

Improving waterway health requires a lot more than a ‘just add water’ approach, so the environmental watering program is embedded within a broader framework of integrated catchment management.³

Over the past 10 years, more than 120 species have directly benefited from water for the environment, and almost half of these species are threatened or endangered.¹

Water for the environment has contributed to safeguarding six internationally-recognised floodplains and wetlands in Victoria, and improved flows in six heritage rivers, protected for their significant recreation, nature conservation scenic or cultural heritage attributes. It has helped re-establish platypus populations following a drastic decline in numbers of this iconic Australian species, notably after the Millennium Drought. Water for the environment has helped to fight the decline of waterbird populations, by providing a mosaic of wetland habitats for feeding and breeding across the landscape. It has served to nurture fish populations, and in some cases, prevent their extinction, by providing the flows needed for them to survive, migrate and spawn. It has supported floodplain forest recovery, including our majestic river red gums, which have been impacted by drought and bushfire. Environmental watering of floodplains and wetlands boosts ecological resilience and productivity by mobilising organic material that feeds many small aquatic insects and fish, which are in turn food for larger fish, reptiles, amphibians, birds and mammals.¹¹

Rivers and wetlands are Victoria’s lifeblood, and we must protect them. Healthy rivers and wetlands are vital for vibrant and healthy communities. They contribute to local farming, fishing, recreation, real estate, amenity and tourism activity. Healthy rivers and wetlands make cities and towns more liveable and support the physical and mental wellbeing of communities. They provide places for people to play, relax and connect with nature. Healthy waterways are integral to the wellbeing of Traditional Owners whose cultural values are intrinsically linked with Healthy Country – land and waters. Healthy wetlands also contribute to combatting climate change by storing greenhouse gases in floodplain and wetland forests.

Rivers and wetlands cannot provide these benefits unless their health is protected and maintained. Environmental watering is part of broader water resource management and integrated catchment management frameworks which are crucial to protecting waterway health, especially in our highly-modified systems where dams, weirs and diversions have changed how water moves across the landscape.

³ Integrated catchment management is the coordinated management of land, water and biodiversity resources based on catchment areas. It incorporates environmental, economic and social considerations. Among other things, integrated catchment management aims to maintain or improve the quality of water resources and the condition of waterways, conserve, protect and build the resilience of natural ecosystems, and provide a holistic approach to achieve multiple catchment management objectives. Environmental watering is one of the many important activities undertaken to achieve catchment management objectives; others include invasive species control, streamside land management, sustainable agriculture practices, sustainable land use planning and development, integrated urban water management and other waterway management activities such as providing fish passage and improving instream habitat.

2.2 Why does the VEWH exist?

The VEWH's overarching mission is based on our legislative objectives – in short, we exist to manage water for the environment to improve the health of Victorian waterways.

The drivers that underpinned our establishment were summarised in the Second Reading speech when the *Water Amendment (Victorian Environmental Water Holder) Bill 2010* was introduced to Parliament:

- **Accountability and transparency:**
“The environmental water entitlements resulting from water recovery projects are considerable and warrant a high level of robust and accountable management. The Water Act 1989 installs the VEWH as the guardian of this important task and improves the transparency of decisions about environmental water.”
- **Independence:**
“The VEWH is accountable to the Minister via planning and reporting requirements as well as a limited power of direction. Within its legislative and policy boundaries, the VEWH is free to make decisions on the use of environmental water to support our waterways and wetlands.”
- **Coordination:**
“Creating a single Victorian entity responsible for liaison ensures that Victorian and Commonwealth environmental water use will be coordinated for maximum benefit. Victoria's position is strengthened because the VEWH puts forward a single voice on state priorities that draws strongly on regional planning.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These drivers of accountability, transparency, independence and coordination are as important and relevant today as they were over a decade ago.

However, other aspects of the VEWH's purpose have evolved over that time. While the primary objective of environmental water entitlements is still to protect the environment,^{iv} in performing its functions, the VEWH must now also consider opportunities to provide for social, recreational and Aboriginal cultural values and uses of waterways.^v By improving waterway health, water for the environment supports many direct economic, recreational, social and Aboriginal cultural benefits for the community. The VEWH and its partners seek to maximise these benefits through environmental watering, where they are consistent with environmental objectives.

The VEWH does not manage water for the environment alone. Victoria's environmental watering program is a program delivered in partnership, that through its complexity, cannot be delivered by any single organisation. Key partners are described below and in Figure 2.

The environmental watering program is part of the Victorian waterway management program as overseen by the Minister for Water through DEECA. Waterway managers — catchment management authorities (CMAs) and Melbourne Water — are the regional planning and delivery arm of the program. The VEWH and waterway managers are progressively partnering with Traditional Owners in delivering water for the environment on Country. In northern Victoria, the VEWH works with the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and the New South Wales and South Australian governments to prioritise and coordinate how and where water for the environment is used in the connected waterways of the southern Murray-Darling Basin. Storage managers (water corporations) operate water storages and major delivery infrastructure to deliver water orders placed by waterway managers. Public land managers (such as Parks Victoria, DEECA and Traditional Owner land management boards for jointly managed parks) are closely involved in planning and delivering water for the environment on public land (such as state forests and national parks). Some delivery of water for the environment also occurs on private land, in voluntary partnership with landholders or corporations. Scientists and communities inform program knowledge of environmental and other values and help monitor the success of delivery of water for the environment (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Key partnerships and responsibilities



3. The challenges

There are many challenges facing the environmental watering program as a whole and the community more broadly. The VEWH has identified the following key challenges to achieving its vision and mission, and to which this strategy responds:

- Lack of water justice for Traditional Owners
- Continued waterway health degradation
- Impacts of climate change.

This 10-year strategy outlines the part the VEWH has to play in addressing these challenges and what outcomes we are working towards in doing so. The VEWH's contribution to addressing these challenges in the environmental watering program complements the efforts of our program partners in the context of broader integrated catchment management and water resource management frameworks.

3.1 Lack of water justice for Traditional Owners

For several thousand generations, Traditional Owners have cared for Country, including maintaining the health and flow of water and sustaining connections to place, each other, animals and culture. Traditional Owners today continue to have obligations to care for Country and its land and waters.

Traditional Owners never ceded rights to lands and waters across Victoria, yet Aboriginal people hold less than 0.2 per cent of water rights in this state. This exclusion denies Traditional Owners the right to care for Country — the essence of Aboriginal social, spiritual, economic and physical wellbeing, and the basis of cultural lore. Water held for the environment by the VEWH as a public authority is water never ceded by Traditional Owners. Healthy Country – and Healthy Mob – can be spearheaded through water held for the environment, and the VEWH is committed to playing its part in addressing this social justice issue.

For generations, First Peoples communities and leaders have called for Treaty to acknowledge the sovereignty of First Nations and to improve the lives of First Peoples. Victorian Traditional Owners maintain that their sovereignty has never been ceded and have called for a Treaty process that delivers self-determination for Victoria's First Peoples. In October 2022, the Victorian Government and the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria signed the *Treaty Negotiation Framework Agreement*.^{vi} The Victorian Government has also established the Yoorrook Justice Commission as the first formal truth-telling process into historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria.^{vii}

Separately to this, changes to the *Water Act 1989* in 2019 require the water sector to explicitly consider Aboriginal cultural values in water planning decisions.

The Victorian Government has also committed to reforms to how water is shared and managed in the future to redress historical injustices. The *Water is Life: Aboriginal Access to Water Roadmap* charts a pathway forward which takes a restorative justice approach to respect the rights of Traditional Owners, while protecting the rights of existing water users. Through the implementation of *Water is Life*, Traditional Owners will have an increased role in determining how water for the environment is used for the purpose of healing Country, including submitting seasonal watering proposals directly to the VEWH and the transfer of water allocation to Traditional Owners.

Achieving these outcomes will take time and resources for both Traditional Owners, the VEWH and other partners to work through new guidelines and frameworks.

3.2 Continued waterway health degradation

Many of Victoria's rivers and wetlands have been significantly modified, compared with how they were during the tens of thousands of years that Traditional Owners managed them. Water now flows differently through the landscape: it is captured in dams and weirs and diverted by infrastructure — pipelines, pumps, drains, levees and constructed channels — to support homes, farms, irrigators, industries, towns and cities. In some rivers, up to half of the water is removed each year to provide water for homes, farms and industry. While this allows communities to grow and thrive, it also means these waterways cannot function as they would naturally.

Since European colonisation of land and waters, the health of most Victorian waterways has declined. Decades of over-extraction of water, coupled with land use change, have reduced plant and animal populations. *The Australian State of the Environment Report 2021*ⁱⁱⁱ highlights the continued decline in the condition of our natural environment. For example, the Aerial Survey of Wetland Birds in Eastern Australia found that the four major indices for waterbirds (total abundance, breeding, number of species breeding and wetland area) continue to show significant declines over time.^{ix} Globally, over 85 percent of wetlands have been lost.^x

Governments have invested billions of dollars to recover water for the environment. While water for the environment aims to maintain or improve the health of waterways, its effectiveness can be limited by a range of factors. For example:

- barriers to fish passage
- invasive species
- degraded river channels
- loss of streamside vegetation
- inability to provide the full range of flow components outlined in environmental flow studies
- constraints to getting water onto floodplain ecosystems for the frequency, duration or extent of inundation that plants and animals need
- water delivery risks during times of peak demand.

This highlights that improving waterway health requires a lot more than a 'just add water' approach. There is considerable complexity for the VEWH and its partners in where and when to best use available water. These decisions need to take account of the limitations described above and the other catchment management activities required to achieve success across Victoria. As managers of a significant public asset, the onus is on the VEWH and its partners to demonstrate and then communicate this success.

3.3 Impacts of climate change

Due to climate change, long-term water availability is declining, increasing the risk of water scarcity. It is predicted that the trend of decreasing cool season rainfall is likely to continue. The long-term water resource assessment undertaken by DEECA for southern Victoria confirms that the impact is disproportionate, with the environmental water reserve being reduced more than water for consumptive purposes. This is because most of the environmental water reserve is not enshrined in secure water entitlements. In some catchments, we may see annual streamflow reductions of about 50 percent by 2065.^{xi} More extreme events (bushfires, floods and droughts) are also predicted. In comparison to historical conditions, Victoria is already experiencing trends towards higher temperatures and more hot days, reductions in rainfall in late autumn and winter, and reductions in runoff and streamflow.

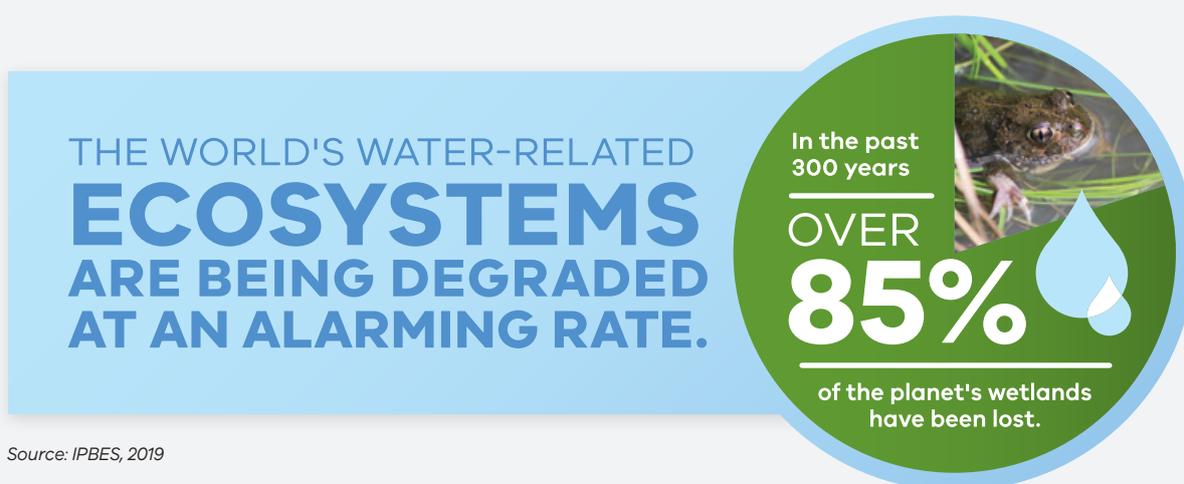
Each of these impacts will have implications for what outcomes can be achieved through the environmental watering program, and therefore how well the VEWH can deliver on its mission. It is likely to mean plant and animal populations experiencing greater stress, becoming more threatened through declining abundance and changing or reducing geographic distribution. This may mean different sites and new delivery methods are required to achieve objectives of most significance, and that some objectives for environmental watering may no longer be appropriate or simply cannot be achieved.

Water security is recognized as one of the great challenges of the 21st century. The triple decline in quantity, quality, and reliability of potable freshwater poses numerous serious problems for humanity and the environment. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries in a global partnership. In recognition of the severity of water problems and the amplification of water scarcity due to climate change, in 2018, the United Nations committed to focus on water for a decade. SDG 6 is *Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all* and SDG 13 is Climate Action. The United Nations urges people to explore nature-based solutions to contemporary water problems.^{xiii} Some of these could include planting trees and increasing forest cover, reconnecting rivers to floodplains, and restoring wetlands to rebalance the water cycle.

3.4 Summary of challenges

These fundamental challenges of a lack of water justice for Traditional Owners, continued waterway health degradation and the impacts of climate change are all inter-related in their implications for the environmental watering program. The past exclusion of Traditional Owners from caring for Country has contributed to waterway health degradation, which will be further impacted by the effects of climate change.

The VEWH is looking to the horizon to continue our journey in adapting to these challenges, which create significant complexity in decision-making around best use of environmental water entitlements in protecting waterway health.



Source: IPBES, 2019

4. What are we going to do over the next 10 years?

We will focus our efforts on five priority areas to tackle key challenges and work with partners to evolve Victoria's environmental watering program in several ways, including:

1. Supporting Traditional Owner self-determination
2. Optimising environmental and community benefits
3. Enhancing outcomes at a landscape-scale
4. Demonstrating and communicating outcomes
5. Adapting to climate change.

The VEWH alone cannot deliver the actions outlined in the above priorities, but for each of them we have identified our role to lead, influence or partner. We will implement the actions in the strategy in collaboration with our partners so the environmental watering program can continue to contribute to maintaining and improving the health of rivers, floodplains and wetlands in the face of key challenges.

This strategy communicates and directs the VEWH's efforts in these strategic directions. It draws together all our strategic work in a way that provides greater clarification about our priorities for the next 10 years, and provides the opportunity to align these efforts with those of our partners.

These five strategic priorities reflect the expectations from communities through government policy directions and the Minister's Letter of Expectations issued to the VEWH.

For each strategic priority, key actions are outlined below and the outcomes we expect to see from these actions after 10 years (ie. by 2033).

4.1 Supporting Traditional Owner self-determination

Traditional Owner self-determination is an enduring element to address the lack of water justice experienced by Aboriginal people since European colonisation. In light of the synergies between waterway health objectives and healing Country, the VEWH and partners managing water for the environment have a key role to play in supporting self-determined pathways for Traditional Owners in addressing water injustice and healing Country.

The VEWH acknowledges that Aboriginal people are intrinsically connected to Country and have been for tens of thousands of years. The VEWH supports the Victorian Government recognition of the far-reaching and intergenerational consequences of colonisation and dispossession. We support the Government commitment to Treaty negotiations and the adoption of self-determination as the guiding approach in Aboriginal affairs. Strengthening the rights and agency of Traditional Owners in water management is critical for achieving self-determination and enabling cultural objectives to be realised, including caring for Country.

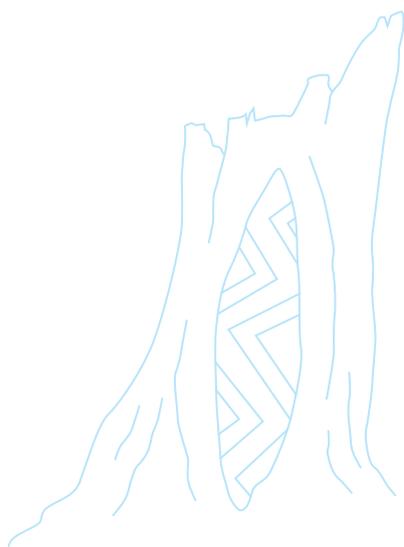
The VEWH will work with Traditional Owners and other program partners to progress self-determination through the environmental watering program. Together with Traditional Owner groups and DEECA (as the agency responsible for government policy in this area), short, medium and long-term pathways will be identified to identify and deconstruct barriers to self-determination.

The VEWH has been a strong advocate for change to support Traditional Owner influence, agency and power in the management of water for the environment. We will continue to implement our Working with Traditional Owners Statement which outlines how we will work with Traditional Owners to embed Aboriginal water influence in managing water for the environment. This aligns with the directions and actions outlined in *Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap*. We are very supportive of these actions and will work closely with Traditional Owners, DEECA and waterway managers to implement them. Opportunities identified for the first five years in Targeted Outcome 3 of the Roadmap include seasonal watering proposals being submitted to the VEWH directly from Traditional Owners and multi-year agreements for the transfer of environmental water allocation to Traditional Owners for dual environmental and cultural benefits.

We will respect the self-determination of each Traditional Owner group about if, when and how they want to put these new arrangements into action.

Actions	VEWH role
We will create an informed, respectful, and culturally safe environment within the VEWH and the broader environmental watering program, through respectful and inclusive policies and procedures, culturally appropriate publications content and cultural competency training and guidance for staff.	Lead
We will evolve our operational practices to provide opportunities for Traditional Owner empowerment in planning, decision-making, delivery and monitoring of water for the environment on Country, through meaningful relationships, understanding Traditional Owner objectives, and watering sites of ecological and cultural significance.	Partner
We will identify and deconstruct barriers to increase Traditional Owner self-determination within the current environmental watering program.	Partner
We will support increased Aboriginal decision-making, leadership and self-governance around water management and rights, through government policy input and implementation, knowledge sharing and supporting the development of future Aboriginal water leaders.	Partner / influence

Outcomes by 2033
The VEWH has supported achievement of Traditional Owner self-determined objectives relating to water for the environment.
Traditional Owners have agency and power in environmental watering decisions.



4.2 Optimising environmental and community benefits

Water is a scarce resource and climate change impacts are only expected to exacerbate this scarcity, with more frequent and extended drought periods. All water users will need to be efficient, effective and optimise outcomes as much as possible.

There are a range of government policy processes and projects that are important to enhancing the outcomes of environmental watering, and the VEWH contributes operational knowledge to the development and implementation of these, including:

- Sustainable Water Strategies (which, amongst other things, provide the opportunity for government to engage communities on recovering water for the environment)
- Victorian Waterway Management Strategy renewal (which will update government policy guiding waterway management, including environmental watering)
- constraints relaxation (to enable re-connection of floodplains to improve ecosystem productivity, whilst managing the risks to private and public property)
- clarifying delivery rights for water for the environment (building on existing interim arrangements to improve certainty that water can be delivered when it is needed for critical environmental objectives).

In the context of integrated catchment management, environmental watering is one of many activities targeting catchment management objectives; environmental watering alone cannot achieve these objectives. To ensure outcomes can be optimised, it is necessary to consider what else is happening in the region and target all key factors that are limiting meaningful environmental outcomes. Waterway managers are responsible for this integrated planning through regional waterway strategies.

In making decisions about water for the environment, it is important that the VEWH is aware of complementary works and measures that are critical to achieving watering objectives. This information is used in assessments of the 'certainty of achieving the environmental benefits and ability to manage other threats', one of the Ministerial criteria that guides prioritisation of watering sites and actions. Infrastructure works (such as pumps and regulators) also allow watering objectives to be achieved, both at sites where it is simply not possible to actively water using overbank flows and at other sites using far less water than would be required with overbank flows. Infrastructure works are already being used to optimise the benefits of existing environmental water entitlements, and this management approach will likely be more important with reduced water availability and natural flows as a result of climate change.

The water grid is the network of dams, reservoirs, irrigation districts, desalination plant, pipes and rivers that supply and distribute water to users. It helps to enhance outcomes by allowing entitlement holders to move water in connected systems to where it is most needed. The VEWH and its partners already utilise the water grid to achieve better outcomes, however as connectivity of the water grid continues to change over time, it is important that the VEWH, particularly with our statewide role in environmental watering, assesses new opportunities to utilise the water grid to meet critical environmental watering needs.

Water allocation trading is the buying and selling of water allocation (previously known as temporary trading). Water allocation trading allows the VEWH to optimise outcomes by moving water to the systems where it is most needed, and to smooth out some of the variability in water availability across systems and across years – variability which is likely to be exacerbated with climate change. The VEWH considers selling some water allocation if foreseeable environmental demands can be met. The VEWH also considers selling some water allocation to invest in complementary works, measures, technical studies or other priorities, where these projects optimise environmental watering outcomes for enduring benefit. For example, the proceeds from the sale of water allocation in 2018 were used to co-fund the design and construction of a fishway at the Koondrook Weir to enable native fish to freely move between the Murray River and the rich habitat of Gunbower Creek. We have also used trade revenue to fund strategic projects that enhance the environmental watering program over the long term, such as advancing landscape-scale planning. The VEWH will need to continue to seek opportunities to use trade to optimise outcomes in the face of water scarcity.

Adapting environmental watering based on new knowledge is also key to enhancing the outcomes that can be achieved. Monitoring and research programs are fundamental to this adaptive management. In addition, Traditional Owners have lived on Country for millennia, yet traditional ecological knowledge remains poorly utilised in Australia's water planning and management. Environmental watering can be enhanced by increasingly using traditional ecological knowledge, hand in hand with Traditional Owners.

We need to continue to work with our partners and deepen our relationships with key stakeholder groups, to further build our understanding of their needs and how our environmental watering decisions can also deliver social, recreational and economic benefits, as well as the cultural benefits we will seek in our partnering with Traditional Owners. The VEWH has embedded these considerations in its seasonal watering plan process. For example, through our partners, we identify where watering events can also support water sports activities (e.g., canoeing, kayaking, rowing, swimming, water skiing), waterbird-related recreational activities, fishing and peaks in visitation (e.g., camping or other public activities on long weekends or school holidays).

Actions	VEWH role
<p>We will contribute to the development and implementation of government policy, strategies and infrastructure projects that address continued waterway health degradation, to enhance environmental watering outcomes and ensure effective integration of environmental watering with broader catchment management activities, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainable Water Strategies - renewal of the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy - constraints relaxation - clarifying delivery rights for water for the environment. 	Influence / partner
<p>We will refine our trade and revenue investment framework to optimise outcomes through strategic investment and we will assess opportunities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - use the water grid to move water to where it is needed most - purchase (temporary) allocations and/or seek substitution arrangements to address critical watering needs at priority waterways - sell (temporary) water allocation to fund strategic projects and/or complementary works (after priority watering demands are able to be met or where revenue investment provides greater environmental outcomes than water delivery). 	Lead
<p>We will work with Traditional Owners, either directly or through waterway managers as self-determined by Traditional Owners, with their free, prior and informed consent, to better consider cultural knowledge in decisions around water for the environment.</p>	Partner
<p>We will improve how delivery of water for the environment provides recreational, social and economic benefits by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - inputting to waterway manager planning - considering the outcomes of community consultation undertaken by waterway managers - continuing to directly engage statewide and peak body stakeholders. 	Partner / influence

Outcomes by 2033
<p>Environmental outcomes are optimised through robust decisions about water for the environment and effective integration with broader land and water management actions.</p>
<p>Critical watering needs at priority waterways are met.</p>
<p>The VEWH has strategically used available water trade revenue to fund priority strategic projects and programs which optimise enduring environmental benefits.</p>
<p>The community's enjoyment, experience and connection to waterways is enhanced through the use of water for the environment.</p>

4.3 Enhancing landscape-scale outcomes

Integrated catchment management is a holistic way of managing land, water and biodiversity from the top to the bottom of catchments.^{xiii} By its nature, it operates at a landscape-scale, as do many of the ecological processes underpinning healthy waterways and threats to them.

When water recovery, and the creation of environmental entitlements which could be actively managed, allowed environmental watering to be incorporated into integrated catchment management, the entitlement volumes were relatively small and so management was focused largely on individual river reaches or wetlands. This site-based approach still considered the significance of each site within the broader landscape, for example by prioritising sites of international and national significance. However, there was largely insufficient water and knowledge to truly deliver and achieve outcomes at a landscape-scale.

Many environmental objectives of the watering program rely on ecosystem processes that operate beyond individual rivers or wetlands.^{xiv} Healthy rivers often rely on the flooding of and connection with floodplain wetlands to bring in the carbon and nutrients that make them truly productive. Fish, waterbirds and other native animals readily move between waterways and use a range of rivers and or wetlands during their life to access food, breed, avoid predators and competitors, or to seek refuge from extreme events such as droughts and floods. To protect these populations, it is necessary to provide the required water regime at the sites a species depends on through its whole life cycle. This means identifying the combinations of waterways necessary for population outcomes and any dependencies between those sites. For example, in a given year, a bird species may rely on one wetland to breed in, while relying on surrounding wetlands for sufficient food resources to feed their chicks; or a fish species may live in one part of the river system for most of their life but migrate to another part to spawn.

There are significantly more environmental entitlements available now than when environmental watering first began. It is possible to start considering outcomes not only within individual rivers and wetlands but also at a broader landscape-scale, especially in highly-connected systems with larger volumes of water for the environment, such as northern Victoria.

Greater consideration of this landscape-scale approach in environmental watering will better address continued waterway health degradation, enhance native plant and animal populations, build their resilience and increase biodiversity. It will also help inform difficult prioritisation decisions in the future with the expected reduction in allocations to existing environmental entitlements as a result of climate change. If done well, water for the environment will be delivered in a co-ordinated way to combinations of waterways that achieve better environmental outcomes than the sum of benefits achieved at each individual site.

Landscape-scale outcomes and objectives need to be defined and agreed across program partners, guided by government policy in documents such as the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy. Water for the environment must continue to be delivered in an integrated catchment management framework which assesses what factors are limiting native plant and animal populations and deciding where, when and how water for the environment should be best applied within the landscape, and what other integrated catchment management measures are required, to best deliver on environmental objectives. This integration is the role of waterway managers, based on prioritisation in regional catchment and waterway strategies.

Many Traditional Owners intrinsically take a landscape view, seeing waters and lands as connected, with an integral relationship between the cultural landscape and all who depend on it. This cultural lens acknowledges that actions at one site have consequences elsewhere in the system. Traditional Owners seek to have Country managed holistically, addressing multiple values and objectives and healing Country and culture.^{xv} This world view and traditional knowledge can guide the environmental watering program to evolve to better incorporate landscape-scale planning.

Landscape-scale planning in environmental watering means making decisions about where to water that:

- recognise the **interdependencies** of different sites in delivering enduring outcomes
- prioritise and water **combinations** of sites
- support populations in **all stages of their life cycle**
- target the geographic scale that reflects relevant **ecological processes**
- seek to learn from Aboriginal world views and **traditional ecological knowledge**
- are informed by long-term and landscape-scale **monitoring and knowledge** programs
- continue to integrate watering decisions with **complementary works and measures** that improve coordinated watering at multiple sites.

Actions	VEWH role
We will work with partners to evolve our understanding of and delivery of landscape-scale outcomes	Partner
We will fund pilot scientific studies to improve the knowledge base for ecological assets or processes at a landscape-scale	Lead
We will collaborate with Traditional Owners to incorporate cultural landscape thinking to inform our decisions	Partner
We will input our operational knowledge during the inclusion of landscape-scale concepts in policies and strategies such as the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy and regional catchment and waterway strategies	Influence
We will advocate for and complement monitoring, modelling and research projects and programs to assess ecological responses at a landscape-scale	Influence / partner / lead
We will advocate for and where possible co-invest in complementary works and strategic projects to optimise outcomes at a landscape-scale.	Influence / partner

Outcomes by 2033

Environmental watering decisions are optimising outcomes at a landscape-scale, based on an established scientific and cultural knowledge base and frameworks.

Water is being delivered to sites/systems that have been prioritised to reflect landscape-scale processes or values to improve environmental outcomes and adapt to climate change.

4.4 Demonstrating and communicating outcomes

As a significant public asset, water for the environment has been recovered by governments to improve the health of rivers and wetlands, and it is important that the benefits from this water recovery are clearly demonstrated to the community on whose behalf they are being delivered. This requires effective monitoring and reporting processes.

Victoria currently uses the Victorian Government’s Victorian Environmental Flows Monitoring and Assessment Program (VEFMAP) and the Wetland Monitoring and Assessment Program (WetMAP) to monitor and help plan our environmental watering efforts. We also benefit from research and monitoring conducted at Barmah Forest, Gunbower Forest, Hattah Lakes, Lindsay, Mulcra and Wallpolla Islands and the Murray River through the Living Murray Program and the Goulburn River through the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office FLOW-MER program, as well as a range of site-based monitoring overseen by waterway managers. As one of many end-users of the monitoring information, the VEWH is often approached to contribute to the design of the monitoring programs. The VEWH may also invest in additional event-based or short-term projects that help to demonstrate and communicate environmental watering outcomes. The VEWH currently reports on the use, carryover and trade of water for the environment each year, and highlights the outcomes achieved, through annual reports and publications including ‘Reflections’.

By looking after the ecological needs of our rivers and our wetlands, we also protect the social, economic and cultural values that communities cherish. Water for the environment provides direct benefits to the community, and many studies have gone on to economically quantify these benefits. The VEWH is interested in being able to clearly communicate these benefits, and if required, influencing or investing in further research in this area.

The VEWH will also play its role as a global citizen to transparently report on how our actions help to progress the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that are relevant to our work.

Actions	VEWH role
We will contribute to Victorian and Commonwealth Government monitoring and knowledge programs to advise on our information needs to report on water for the environment outcomes.	Influence
We will complement Victorian and Commonwealth Government monitoring and knowledge programs by investing in event-based or short-term projects that demonstrate compliance and communicate outcomes at both site and landscape-scales.	Partner / lead
We will build on existing communication and reporting of environmental outcomes, including by consolidating the knowledge gained from monitoring and research.	Partner / lead
We will demonstrate how our work contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in our corporate plans.	Lead

Outcomes by 2033
The site-based and landscape-scale outcomes from water for the environment across multiple years are demonstrated and communicated.
Interested stakeholders understand the environmental and associated recreational, social and economic benefits of the environmental watering program.
The VEWH has contributed to improvements in global sustainability.

4.5 Adapting to climate change

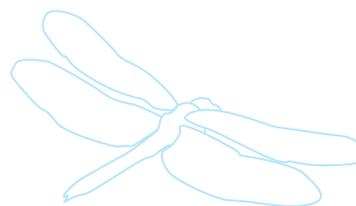
The environmental watering program is already very responsive to climate variability. Program partners use a seasonally adaptive approach in both annual and longer-term planning, where a range of climate scenarios are used to prioritise watering actions under drought through to wet conditions. During dry and drought periods, the VEWH has a more active role in prioritising watering actions across waterway management boundaries to ensure that outcomes are being maximised across the State.

These approaches put the program in good stead to deal with the increased variability expected with climate change, but there is still more that can be done, especially to deal with the longer-term reduction in overall water availability that is predicted.

Moving forward, incorporating knowledge of potential climate scenarios in decisions about use of water for the environment may also include: prioritising water use to support significant plants, animals or habitats that may become more threatened as a result of climate change; reducing water use in areas that cannot be sustained under a changed climate; or adding additional sites to the program to deliver outcomes at a landscape-scale. Selection of sites to be considered in the environmental watering program is the role of waterway managers in consultation with communities including through regional waterway strategies. We will continue to work closely with waterway managers and DEECA to adapt selection and management of environmental watering sites in light of climate change.

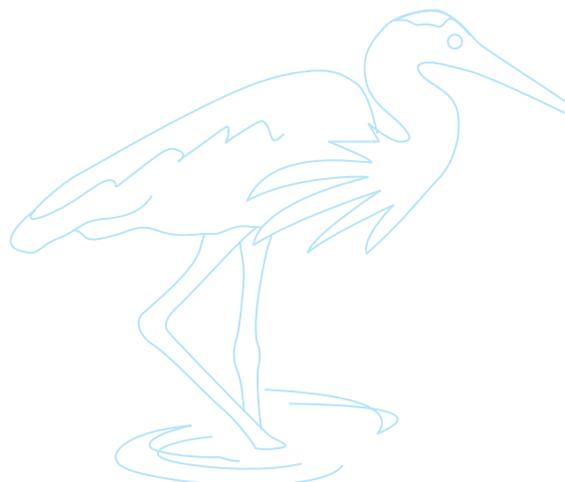
The Victorian Government is also evolving water policy to deal with the longer-term challenges of climate change. The recent completion of the Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy (SWS) will result in further recovery of water for the environment to help ameliorate impacts on the environment. Any reviews of other regional SWS, plus a new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy, and associated Regional Waterway Strategies, provide an excellent opportunity to evolve the environmental watering program. The VEWH will proactively provide strategic input into key policy reforms to enable more effective or efficient use of water for the environment in the face of climate change.

As well as needing to adapt to climate change, water for the environment may also have a role to play in helping to mitigate it. Victoria's inland wetlands have vast potential for capturing carbon, as wetlands can store an average of 34 to 44 times more carbon than forests.^{xvi} Whilst freshwater wetlands can store significant carbon, wetland degradation can also lead to the release of previously stored carbon.^{xvii} By improving wetland health, water for the environment improves carbon storage in wetlands, helping to mitigate climate change and providing significant social and economic benefits. The VEWH also recognises the small part that our operations contribute towards climate change mitigation and our role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goal 13 Climate Action.



Actions	VEWH role
<p>We will respond to climate change by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - assessing the risk of climate change to our water holdings under a range of different scenarios and managing those risks - inputting to the update of existing government policy for environmental watering objective setting to consider climate change - preparing for and inputting to dry inflow contingency plans (for high-risk systems) - contributing to the development and implementation of government policy and projects that address climate change challenges, such as Sustainable Water Strategies, the renewal of the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy and the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project. 	<p>Lead / partner</p> <p>Influence</p> <p>Influence</p> <p>Influence</p>
<p>We will work with our partners to understand, manage and communicate the carbon emission impacts and carbon storage benefits associated with management of water for the environment.</p>	<p>Partner</p>
<p>We will work with DEECA to assess, reduce and if necessary, offset emissions for all office, vehicle, travel and waste services.</p>	<p>Partner</p>

Outcomes by 2033
<p>Our planning and decision-making optimise outcomes in the face of climate change.</p>
<p>Contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 13 Climate Action by achieving net zero emissions for all office, vehicle, travel and waste services by 2025.</p>



5. How does the VEWH operate?

The Victorian environmental watering program has been built on solid foundations. It operates within a broader framework for integrated catchment management and water resource management, with clear legislation, sound policy and a devolved decision-making model. The VEWH and program partners have managed the water holdings to the best effect we can with the information and tools we have available.

The VEWH recognised at the outset the need to establish:

- strong relationships with program partners and stakeholders
- clear implementation arrangements and guidelines to put the legislative planning and reporting framework into practice
- a culture of continuous improvement and learning by doing.

The foundations of how we operate are enshrined in the VEWH's corporate values of collaboration, integrity, commitment and initiative.

The following aspects of the VEWH's operations have been critical from the outset and are now firmly embedded in our day-to-day operations:

- **Ensuring transparency and accountability:** The VEWH manages a significant public asset and has an important mission to deliver on behalf of all Victorians, who expect us to do our job with accountability and transparency – something that will become even more important as water scarcity increases.
- **Influencing effective government policy:** Government policy sets the operating environment within which the VEWH manages its water and therefore has significant effect on how effectively we respond to the significant challenges described in this strategy – the VEWH has lived operational experience to contribute to government policy development and implementation.
- **Strengthening our constructive culture:** A healthy, diverse, capable and collaborative workforce is critical for us to implement this strategy and respond to the challenges before us.

The VEWH recognises the need to continue to dedicate time and resources to these areas to respond to key challenges.

5.1 Transparency and accountability

Acting with integrity is a corporate value that we continually adhere to and being transparent and accountable is a core part of that value set. The VEWH operates under a rigorous regulatory framework and manages a long-term average of 655 gigalitres of water a year for the environment, which is a significant public asset. Understanding how decisions are made about the use of the water and the outcomes that result from it, are therefore, a matter of public interest.

Victoria's environmental watering program is based on a comprehensive governance, planning, engagement and reporting framework. Plans and reports are publicly communicated for transparency and accountability, including the corporate plan, seasonal watering plan, annual report and 'Reflections'.

VEWH Commissioners and staff pride themselves on being trustworthy and reliable and aspire to continue to be recognised as an organisation trusted for information and in how we operate. We make robust decisions informed by the best available contemporary science, traditional ecological knowledge and community input, and transparently communicate the rationale for our decisions, the use of water for the environment and associated finances. We have a responsibility to keep delivering on and communicating sustained environmental outcomes for waterways and communities.

Victoria's environmental watering program is still relatively young and a 'learn by doing' approach has been central to its adaptive management and continuous improvement. The VEWH continues to strive to be an innovative leader in what we do. We will continue to practice adaptive management by reviewing our processes, taking on board new science and information including from Traditional Owners and stakeholders, and continuing to learn and improve.

5.2 Influencing policy

Management of water for the environment is still a relatively new discipline compared with other waterway health programs (such as riparian management, erosion control and salinity programs). Water corporations have developed river operations for more than 100 years to supply water to towns and for irrigation; delivery of water for the environment requires different operational settings. As such, the policy context in which the VEWH operates is still evolving. Broader reforms such as the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, state government policy and strategy development have a significant impact on the way the VEWH will work and our operating environment – and therefore, how efficiently and effectively water for the environment can be managed.

The implementation of existing sustainable water strategies and any reviews of these, plus the new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy, and associated Regional Waterway Strategies, to be developed in the next two years, provide an excellent opportunity to evolve the environmental watering program.

There are Victorian Government projects underway to address water delivery issues and constraints, particularly through the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism projects, under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

The VEWH will have a role in implementing the reform directions outlined in *Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap*.

The VEWH can input to and influence the development and implementation of these policy reforms by leveraging our strong relationships with policy organisations and other partners and contributing our lived operational knowledge. The VEWH's relationships and knowledge put it in good stead to adapt to new challenges and policies as they arise.

5.3 Constructive culture

A constructive culture underpins the delivery of our strategy and programs. Our people are very much at the heart of this and are amongst our most important strengths.

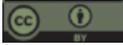
We work to our full potential, take initiative, think independently, participate without taking over, and voice unique perspectives and concerns while working toward consensus. Creativity and curiosity are fostered in place of conformity and indifference. We understand that collaboration and coordination lead to better results than competition and silos, and we value the strong relationships we have with partners and stakeholders who provide critical expertise and input to the VEWH's decision-making. We value our people and care for their safety and wellbeing. The VEWH People Strategy has enabled significant improvements to our team culture, workload management and addressing workplace changes due to COVID-19, and this will continue to be a focus.

As we move forward, the VEWH is committed to continually strengthening our culture, diversity and capability. We aspire to continue to have a diverse and engaged workforce and a safe and healthy workplace environment. We will have a high level of skill, confidence and capacity that is aligned to our strategy to effectively do our work. As we implement this strategy, we will consider whether new or different capability and/or structures are required to achieve success.

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