

# Planning our Basin future together

Closing the Loop Report  
August 2024





Cover: Yorta Yorta / Murray River at Echuca

Above credit: Mallee Catchment Management Authority

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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 honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices. We are committed to genuinely partnering with Victorian Traditional Owners and Victoria's Aboriginal community to progress their aspirations.

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# Executive summary



Hattah Lakes  
Credit: Mallee Catchment  
Management Authority

Public consultation was undertaken on Victoria's approach to working with communities to implement the next stage of the Basin Plan outlined in the *Planning our Basin future together* prospectus.

A range of views were heard from stakeholders, Traditional Owners and individuals who participated.

Overall, feedback from the community was supportive of Victoria's approach with:

- 68% of survey respondents supporting the principles for further water recovery in Victoria
- 81% of survey respondents supporting working together at a catchment scale to identify potential water recovery projects to contribute to environmental outcomes under the Basin Plan, and
- 81% of survey respondents supporting engaging with irrigation communities about the need to align water recovery with network rationalisation or reconfiguration.

We heard that working together at a catchment scale leverages local knowledge and lessons from past water recovery projects to design solutions that align with community aspirations. While there was support for the principles and approach to engaging with communities, respondents agree that implementation would be challenging, but is worth the effort compared with the impact of untargeted water purchases.

Key concerns raised in feedback related to the impacts of water recovery for the environment (especially open-tender water purchase) on irrigation districts and regional Victorian communities, as well as the need to protect local environmental outcomes. Some respondents emphasised the environmental benefits of further water recovery, while others noted the current challenges in delivering environmental water recovered to date.

In response to the feedback received the principles and the engagement approach for the next steps of developing regional initiatives have been confirmed. Minor adjustments to the principles have been made in response to stakeholder input and discussion with Traditional Owners, and a number of actions have been identified to address other feedback.

# Background



Latji Latji and Ngintait / Psyche Bend Pumps  
Credit: Darryl Whitaker

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan sets limits on how much water can be used for irrigation, drinking water and industry to ensure the long-term health of the environment. The Basin Plan was signed into law in November 2012 under the *Commonwealth Water Act 2007*.

Since 2013, the Victorian Government has worked with Victorian Basin communities to deliver the Basin Plan in a way that achieves positive outcomes for communities, the environment and regional economies, and increases Traditional Owners' involvement.

## Changes made to the Basin Plan by the Commonwealth Government

In December 2023, the Commonwealth Government made changes to the *Commonwealth Water Act 2007* affecting the Basin Plan. Victoria did not support the changes to remove the existing cap on water purchases and socio-economic conditions previously agreed to by all states and the Commonwealth Government to protect communities, including rules that prevented the use of water purchases to recover the 450 gigalitres (GL).

The changes provide the Commonwealth Government with the power to purchase up to 300 GL of water to meet existing 'bridging the gap' targets (the outcome required to reach the agreed Basin Plan target of 2,750 GL), as well as purchase water towards the additional 450 GL, with no requirements to protect socio-economic outcomes. This means up to an additional 750 GL could be recovered across the Basin by the Commonwealth Government.

## Victoria's plan

The evidence is clear that open tender water purchases result in significant economic harm to farm businesses, industries, the agricultural sector and the communities who rely on them. They will also mean that the potential environmental benefits of further water recovery will be limited, because the focus on on-ground outcomes and the necessary works and operational changes that are critical to rehabilitating environmentally and culturally important landscapes will be missing.

In May 2024, in response to the Commonwealth changes, the Victorian Government released *Planning our Basin future together – a prospectus to safeguard Victoria's environments and communities in the Murray-Darling Basin* (the prospectus).

The prospectus outlines an approach for working with Victorian communities, Traditional Owners and the Commonwealth Government to ensure Basin Plan water recovery happens in a way and through a process that can get the best outcomes for Victorian environments and communities.

By working with communities, including Traditional Owners, we will make sure that any further water recovery in Victoria will have real, beneficial outcomes, without the negative socio-economic impacts of open tender water purchases.

More information about the prospectus, including factsheets, can be found on the [Water and Catchments website](#).

# Summary of feedback



Yorta Yorta / Moodie Swamp  
Credit: Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority

## Introduction

The prospectus was published for public consultation on [Engage Victoria](#) on 14 May 2024 for a period of six weeks, closing on 23 June 2024.

Throughout May and June 2024, DEECA, in partnership with water corporations and catchment management authorities, engaged in 49 consultation sessions with communities across northern Victoria, including online, in-person and hybrid briefings and information sessions with partners and stakeholders and two public webinars.

These conversations provided the opportunity to discuss Victoria's principles for further water recovery and our approach for working together with communities to identify water recovery opportunities.

Through the Engage Victoria consultation platform, people, organisations or businesses could complete a survey and/or make a submission. The submissions received have been published on Engage Victoria.

This report consolidates feedback obtained during the consultation process to highlight what we heard during consultation. These insights will inform the next steps of our Basin Plan implementation approach.

More information on this consultation can be found on the [Engage Victoria website](#).

The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) sincerely thanks those who have taken the time to provide their input on *Planning our Basin future together*.



Credit: Craig Moodie

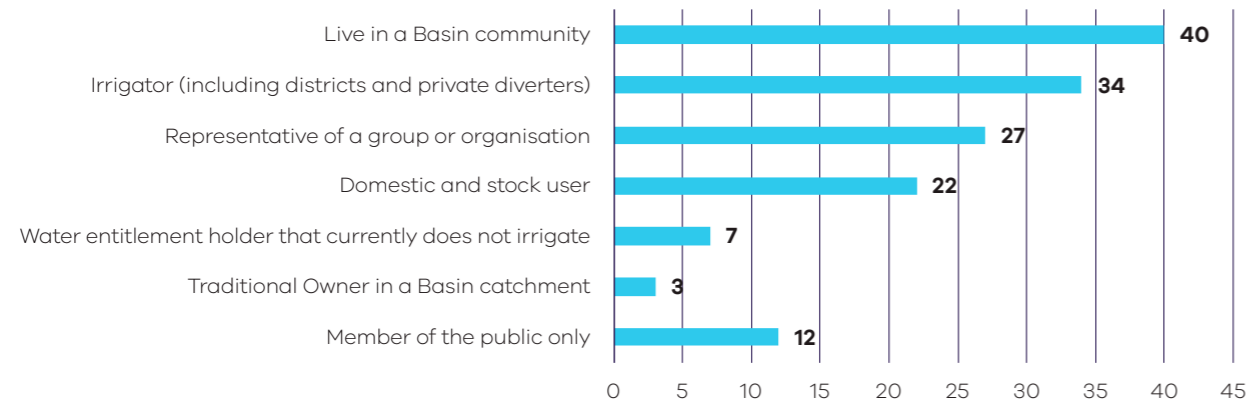
## Who we heard from

During the consultation period, the Engage Victoria website was viewed 5,037 times by 1,723 unique visitors. The prospectus was downloaded 480 times, and 139 supporting fact sheets were downloaded.

We received over 100 submissions (93 survey responses and 22 written submissions), with respondents representing a range of different

interest groups and parts of the community. The results demonstrate respondents' strong connections to Victoria's Basin catchments, with many respondents identifying themselves in multiple ways (for example, as irrigators and domestic and stock users) (Figure 1).

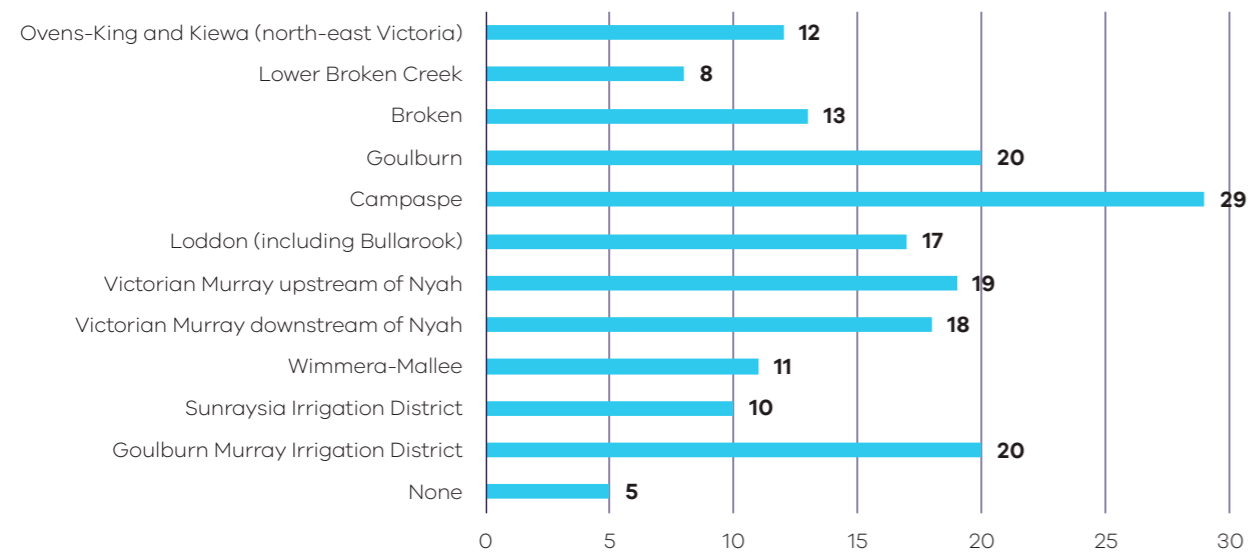
Figure 1: How respondents identified themselves (multiple responses could be selected)



Respondents represented a broad geographic spread across Victoria's Basin catchments, with most (95%) identifying themselves as being involved in one or more Basin catchments or irrigation districts. The breakdown of responses is shown in Figure 2.

Five respondents (5%) indicated they were not involved in any Basin catchments or irrigation districts. A map showing Victoria's Murray-Darling Basin catchments can be found at Appendix 1.

Figure 2: How respondents identified their location in northern Victoria (multiple responses could be selected)



## What we heard

### Principles for further water recovery in Victoria

*Planning our Basin future together* sets out principles for how we consider options for further water recovery for any purpose in northern Victoria – including towards the agreed 2,750 GL Basin Plan target, or the additional 450 GL (Table 1).

We sought feedback on how well these principles reflect community values and cover what we need to consider as we work together on identifying opportunities for further water recovery.

Table 1: Principles for further water recovery in Victoria

Principle	Why it matters
<b>Demonstrated environmental benefits in and for Victoria</b>	<p>Victorian landscapes should benefit from water recovery. While progress has been made on rehabilitating our riverine landscapes, there is more to do.</p> <p>Our rivers are heavily regulated, and we need a strategic approach, including complementary works like fishways and removing unnecessary infrastructure. Without this, further water recovery will have little benefit for our rivers, and in some instances will pose risks for rivers, wetlands, and floodplains.</p>
<b>Minimised impact on water availability for towns, industries and agricultural production</b>	<p>Water availability for things like agriculture, industries, sports grounds and parks and urban drinking supplies is the foundation of northern Victorian communities.</p> <p>A strategic approach to water recovery that recognises these important values will give us the best chance of supporting strong, resilient, and thriving industries, towns and the communities they support.</p>
<b>Proactive structural change to support a sustainable future for irrigators and communities</b>	<p>As water availability and ownership changes across northern Victoria, it is more important than ever to have upfront transparency and understanding of the costs, benefits, and long-term viability of irrigated systems.</p> <p>This will mean that water users will have the infrastructure they need and can remain an important part of their regional economies for a long time to come.</p> <p>Regional development goals will be incorporated, so that the long-term benefit of any change lines up with where our regions are heading in the future.</p>
<b>Supports progress towards Traditional Owner self-determination in water access and management</b>	<p>Victoria has a commitment to supporting Traditional Owner self-determination to access water and influence water management.</p> <p>We need to work in partnership with Traditional Owners to ensure that when major projects or changes are considered, we incorporate Traditional Owner knowledge and outcomes up front, making the most of all opportunities.</p>



Credit: Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority



Credit: Darryl Whitaker

## Support for the principles

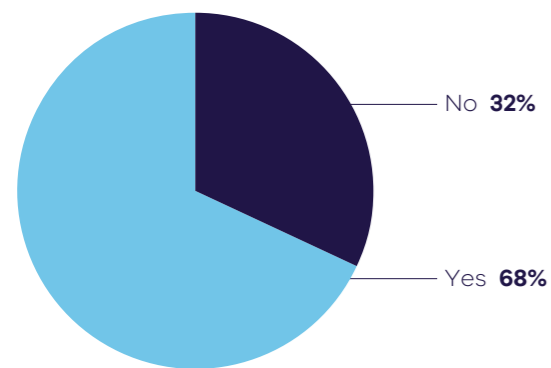
The principles were generally supported with the majority of survey respondents (68%) saying they would assist in guiding discussions on how we plan our Basin future together (Figure 3). The survey responses, written submissions and conversations provided broader insight into the support for the principles, as well as areas for improvement or further discussion.

The principles were largely seen as providing a clear framework and direction for discussions about the Basin Plan that focus on outcomes. Communicating these goals and priorities was seen as important to help people and the Commonwealth understand Victoria's approach to the Basin Plan.

"It provides much needed parameters in terms of how we need to negotiate the restoring our rivers framework approach"

Group or organisation member

Figure 3: Principles for further water recovery in Victoria



## Feedback themes

Key themes that came through from the feedback included:

### Balancing interests

The principles were generally seen to represent environmental, social, economic and Traditional Owner interests. However, some perceived irrigation as being prioritised over other forms of agriculture, the environment, and Traditional Owners.

While recognising the necessity of the principles and agreeing with them, some respondents questioned the feasibility of adhering to them. In particular, the respondents questioned how trade-offs between different values and stakeholders will be managed, given the complexity of balancing environmental needs with agricultural productivity.

"I think that these principles cover the key stakeholders/interests in this process without placing greater importance of one over the other."

Irrigator

"The key principles form a good framework on which to base future discussions"

Irrigator

"The Murray-Darling Basin needs a fairer system for water allocation, fair sharing between the river, wetlands and floodplains on one hand, and cultural uses and irrigation, and sharing between upstream users and downstream users, and effective regulation of the water market."

Environment Group

## Flood risks

Respondents identified there was no consideration of the risk of flooding as part of the prospectus, both the potential for increasing risk of flooding or opportunities to minimise flooding risk as part looking at water recovery a catchment scale.

"There is nothing in there that addresses flood mitigation for town residents"

Irrigator

## Implementation

Amongst the support for the principles, several respondents called for more detailed, actionable plans for implementation, particularly in regard to structural change to support irrigators, industries and communities.

There was also a call for more information on how decisions will be made about where to reconfigure or rationalise irrigation districts and whether irrigators wanting to continue in irrigation would be supported to do so.

"These principles are fine to guide discussions, but I have reservations about how decisions are going to be made regarding rationalisation of the districts."

Irrigator

## Past experiences

Some respondents raised doubts about whether the principles would translate effectively into action and sought more information about consultation processes. We heard that many have a sense of distrust towards government and consultation processes, expressing fatigue from previous consultations that did not lead to meaningful action or consideration of community input.

"Our communities are suffering from consulting fatigue, we talk, we meet, we write submissions, we rally, we host both federal and state ministers and peak bodies however this all seems to fall on deaf ears as the plan rolls on regardless of our concerns, knowledge or possible solutions. We are very wary of more "Tick a box" community consultation so I dearly hope the "Planning our Basin Future Together" is genuine in its endeavour as another round of empty promises will be the final straw for already stressed communities."

Irrigator

## Traditional Owners

There was a call for more clarity and openness in the process of increasing Traditional Owner involvement in water access and management, to avoid misconceptions about how this may affect other water users. There was also a call to be clearer around the legal obligations all governments have in meeting Traditional Owner rights.

"Involving TO's in management is great but it must be a clear and open process to allay suspicions."

Community member

"... fully supports this principle and welcomes the Victorian Government's commitments towards Traditional Owner self-determination in water access and management."

Environment Group

## Working together at the catchment scale

Planning our Basin future together outlines a summary of each of Victoria's Murray-Darling Basin catchments, describing the water which flows through them, the water-dependent values in each region, what the scope of change associated with water recovery could be and what this might mean for local environmental outcomes.

Looking at each of Victoria's Basin catchments and the irrigation systems within them will allow options for water recovery that will have the biggest benefits and least harm to be identified, including opportunities to recover additional water through changes to system operations.

To establish support for this approach we asked if we should work with communities and stakeholders to look at each system individually to find opportunities to align further water recovery with our guiding principles.

### Support for the approach

The survey feedback received showed strong support (81%) for working with communities and stakeholders to look at each system and develop tailored approaches to water recovery, recognising that each region has unique conditions and needs (Figure 4). In survey responses, written submissions and through conversations, we heard local knowledge and participation were crucial for achieving positive outcomes.

Taking a catchment scale approach was seen as essential to understanding the diversity of local perspectives and what opportunities are available. This approach was seen as more effective than a uniform strategy. Collaborating in this way was viewed as necessary for balanced decision-making and innovation that can lead to better solutions.

"Catchment scale solutions are essential - this is the way to deliver the most environmental benefits while minimising the negative social and economic impacts. Engaging communities and stakeholders at this scale is essential."

Group or organisation member

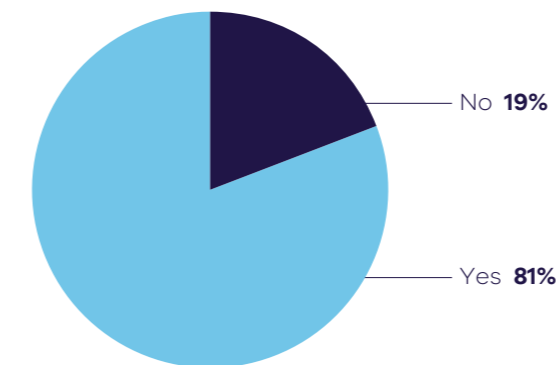
"Minimising impacts to communities is key to ensuring there is no further decline from these buybacks to the already stressed regional areas."

Irrigator

"Working together drives innovation and a broad range of views which I believe will result in positive outcomes."

Domestic and stock

Figure 4: Working together at the catchment scale



Credit: Mallee Catchment Management Authority







Credit: Mallee Catchment Management Authority



Latji Latji and Ngintait / Orange groves in Mildura  
Credit: Darryl Whitaker

## Feedback themes

Key themes that came through from the feedback included:

### System connectivity

There was recognition that while individual systems need tailored approaches, their interconnectivity should not be ignored. A balance between local solutions, system-wide considerations, and broader environmental needs was seen to be necessary.

“Each zone has its own particular issues that may differ to other regions.”

Irrigator

“While we need to work with stakeholders and communities we still need to understand how or what altering one system will impact the surrounding systems”

Irrigator

### Implementation

There was optimism about the potential benefits of working together alongside concerns about implementation challenges. It was noted that a catchment approach would be time-consuming, resource-intensive, and often difficult to manage effectively, but critical for success. There was an acknowledgment that strong governance is required for effective implementation.

“We feel it is very important that you work with communities and stakeholders to look at each system individually because local people have the most relevant knowledge and each system has its own unique properties and threats.”

Group or organisation member

“I agree that this is the best way to go however have concerns that this is going to be a difficult process and could take a significant amount of time. Am concerned that to do this properly, we may not have the time/resources...”

Irrigator

## Past experiences

Some respondents shared doubts about the ability to meaningfully engage with communities due to past consultation experiences where community input was not taken on board. Others noted where these approaches have worked effectively in the past and instances where taking community knowledge on board would have achieved better outcomes.

“There is a bank of knowledge in each community that has proven beneficial in previous programs (e.g. salinity mitigation).”

Non irrigating water entitlement holder

“There are many examples of where if local knowledge had been implemented projects would have been more successful and infrastructure would be more fit for purpose.”

Irrigator

## Engaging with irrigation communities

The potential scale of Commonwealth Government water purchase means that rationalisation of irrigation areas needs to be considered and discussed with irrigators and the broader community. We know from experience that irrigation rationalisation is hard and requires complex negotiations with affected landholders, but it can result in better system scale outcomes than can be achieved through untargeted water purchase.

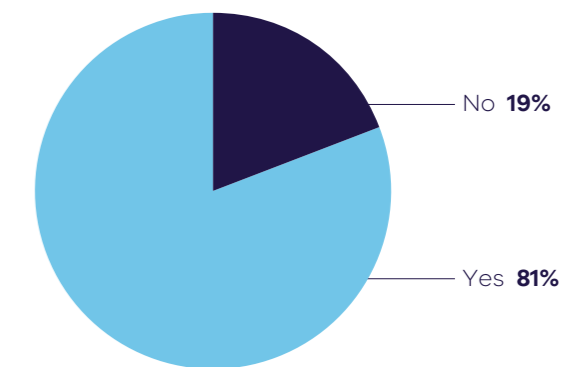
We need to work with irrigation district customers to identify where opportunities may exist to strategically align water purchase with reconfiguration or rationalisation of infrastructure to maintain the efficiency and affordability of irrigation systems.

If this is done in a coordinated way, the flow-on impacts of locally reduced agricultural production – including to downstream sectors or regional economies – are confined to a particular region, making it easier to design effective targeted government assistance to support transition.

### Support for engaging with irrigation communities

A majority of survey respondents (81%) thought irrigation communities should talk about the need to align water recovery with network rationalisation or reconfiguration (Figure 5). The survey responses, written submissions and conversations encouraged proactive and strategic approaches to address the challenges faced by irrigation communities in the context of additional water recovery and Commonwealth purchase programs.

Figure 5: Engaging with irrigation communities





Credit: Darryl Whitaker



Credit: Pete Glenane/HIVis Pictures

## Feedback themes

Key themes that came through from the feedback included:

### Irrigation rationalisation

We heard that irrigation communities are conscious of the need for these conversations and that closures should be considered in parts of the system that are not efficient or where supported by communities. Many respondents saw this as a necessary step for securing the long-term viability of irrigation networks.

“We must take the opportunity to create a sustainable irrigation industry in the GMID. The footprint of irrigation must be reduced and irrigations areas rationalized now.”

Domestic and stock

“Very tough task but ultimately tough decisions are needed for the greater good. The channel footprint is enormous for the volume of deliveries and that ratio will continue to erode with further buybacks and industry changes, so the remaining few will be paying enormous bills.”

Irrigator

“Given the massive changes in irrigation and water reform, aligning water recovery with reconfiguration and rationalisation is an important way to transition through change.”

Irrigator

“The Taskforce strongly supports the Victorian Government's advocacy for a strategic approach to any program of water buy-backs with a goal to optimise/reduce the irrigated footprint rather than previous approaches which have resulted in the "swiss cheese" effect.”

Goulburn-Murray Resilience Taskforce

### Transition support

Providing transition support for affected irrigators and communities was seen as essential. As was the need to engage with up- and down-stream industries who may be affected by these decisions. The need for there to be options available for those that want to continue irrigating to do so was also highlighted.

“Liaise with farmers, set a deadline, present options, such as dry cropping, then provide tools to assist in getting there.”

Past irrigator

“Support the transition of irrigated businesses to alternative dryland businesses”

Group or organisation member

“Industry must be engaged in a manner that recognises its geography and the threats to its viability that may result from the structural adjustment (contraction) of irrigated agriculture.”

Committee 4 Greater Shepparton

### Broader regional objectives

Some respondents offered suggestions for how changes to irrigation networks could support broader regional objectives and provide benefits to the community.

“The VicGrid [Renewable] Energy Zones should now concentrate in areas where irrigation infrastructure will be eliminated to assist other initiatives to provide more community benefits.”

Domestic and stock

“A broad-based regional development lens needs to be used and benefits not just limited to the irrigation industry.”

Irrigator

### Transparency

Clear goals and a planned approach were seen as necessary to help guide discussions and ensure stakeholders understand the objectives and potential outcomes. The importance of building trust between government and communities, through the provision of clear, factual and understandable information and avoiding rushed decisions was emphasised.

“Conversations must be open, transparent and honest. They must offer opportunity for one-to-one discussion as well as open house meetings.”

Irrigator

“Having dedicated customer consultation committees would help establish community trust and respect.”

Irrigator

“Use learnings from Connections. Employ suitably qualified personnel from outset & engage only when plan is clear.”

Water entitlement holder non-irrigator

### Engagement

Suggestions for effective engagement included one-on-one conversations, community meetings, small group workshops, public forums, and using a variety of communication platforms to reach all community members.

“By ensuring that communities are involved in discussions from the beginning and throughout the decision-making process and their views are genuinely considered.”

Group or organisation member

“While we need to talk to communities, it needs to get down to landowner level rather than talk to a group where the loudest voice sets up a consensus situation that is seen by outsiders as the community view.”

Community member

“In instances where you are getting down to decisions on what should happen where, one on one discussions will need to be had.”

Irrigator



Yorta Yorta / Gunbower Creek  
Credit: Darryl Whitaker

## How we work together

We asked survey respondents how we can best engage in-person and online with stakeholders in their catchment. Responses show a desire for a range of engagement methods in-person and online emphasising the need to ensure comprehensive and genuine community involvement.

The most preferred methods of in-person engagement were through community meetings and interviews, followed by workshops and community reference groups.

The most preferred methods of on-line engagement were newsletters and/or email updates, surveys and webinars. Lesser preferred options were social media, Engage Victoria and websites. The need for webinars to enable attendees to ask questions was highlighted.

Many respondents showed a preference for communications through print media such as local newspapers or through written correspondence. Using email and SMS to notify people of upcoming events or website updates was seen as a way to encourage participation.

There was a strong preference for direct, personalised, and more traditional face-to-face engagement.

"This is a delicate and confronting conversation that should be resourced for in-person engagement at as many levels as possible. On-line is a last resort."

Irrigator

"Face to face sessions get better results."

Group or organisation member

While some support online methods, combining them with traditional and direct engagement strategies to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness was seen as necessary. The need to consider the views of the broader public and provide the opportunity for those outside the Basin to have input was also raised.

"Online is not an acceptable way as there's too many people that are interested parties in this that don't get online."

Irrigator

Opportunities to use existing channels, such as existing stakeholder and community groups, water agency networks, communications from water authorities (e.g. GMW podcast), and community events to raise awareness were suggested. The power of trusted voices in the community and word of mouth was emphasised. Some cautioned about the use of methods that would provide an opportunity for louder voices to dominate.

"Best to avoid processes that provide an opportunity for the noisy minority or those with political axes to grind."

Community member

Feedback emphasised the need for genuine and respectful engagement, clear communication and transparent processes. Communities want to understand how decisions will be made and how community input will be incorporated.

"Respectful and genuine collaboration between community and Authorities would result in improved outcomes for all involved."

Irrigator

"The methods outlined above will be a great start, so long as the engagement is genuine, considered and empowering the community rather than just a tick the box consultation exercise."

Irrigator



## Response to feedback

Proposed actions to respond to some of the key issues raised in public feedback is outlined below.

### Principles

Based on the feedback received through consultation, the principles have been confirmed to be broadly fit-for-purpose in supporting the

development of water recovery options. Minor changes have been made to ensure the consideration of flood risk is explicitly outlined, and that existing legal obligations for governments regarding Traditional Owners are clearly included.

**Action – The principles have been updated in response to key feedback, as outlined in Table 2.**

Table 2: Principles for further water recovery in Victoria

Principle	Why it matters
<b>Demonstrated environmental benefits in and for Victoria</b>	Victorian landscapes should benefit from water recovery. While progress has been made on rehabilitating our riverine landscapes, there is more to do. Our rivers are heavily regulated, and we need a strategic approach, including complementary works like fishways and removing unnecessary infrastructure. Without this, further water recovery will have little benefit for our rivers, and in some instances will pose risks for rivers, wetlands, and floodplains.
<b>Minimised impact on water availability for towns, industries and agricultural production</b>	Water availability for things like agriculture, industries, sports grounds and parks and urban drinking supplies is the foundation of northern Victorian communities. A strategic approach to water recovery that recognises these important values will give us the best chance of supporting strong, resilient, and thriving industries, towns and the communities they support.
<b>Proactive structural change to support a sustainable future for irrigators and communities</b>	As water availability and ownership changes across northern Victoria, it is more important than ever to have upfront transparency and understanding of the costs, benefits, and long-term viability of irrigated systems. This will mean that water users will have the infrastructure they need and can remain an important part of their regional economies for a long time to come. Regional development goals will be incorporated, so that the long-term benefit of any change lines up with where our regions are heading in the future.
<b>Meet our legal obligations and support progress towards Traditional Owner self-determination in water access and management</b>	Victoria has a commitment to supporting Traditional Owner self-determination to access and hold water and influence water management. Victoria will fulfil our obligations to Traditional Owners as per the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Commonwealth and State legislation, and relevant settlement agreements between the Victorian Government and specific Traditional Owner groups. We will work in partnership with Traditional Owners in a manner consistent with government policies including Water is Life and DEECA's Aboriginal Self-Determination Reform Strategy – Papangarli Marnmarnepu to ensure that when major projects or changes are considered, we incorporate Traditional Owner knowledge and outcomes up front, making the most of all opportunities.

## Working together at the catchment scale

There was very strong support for consultation and engagement on the next steps of Basin Plan implementation to be done at a regional or catchment-scale.

The concerns around implementation, alignment with other Commonwealth programs and meaningful consultation highlight the benefit of a community consultation approach to additional water recovery.

**Action – DEECA will seek Commonwealth funding to undertake feasibility studies and develop business cases, then work through the options with communities at a regional or catchment-scale. In each catchment, knowledge and perspectives from local stakeholders will be central to the development and implementation of projects.**

**Action – DEECA, Water Corporations and Catchment Management Authorities will partner with Traditional Owners and work with communities in the delivery of feasibility studies and business cases.**

## Engaging with irrigation communities

There was clear acknowledgement of the benefits of aligning any future water recovery with rationalisation or reconfiguration of irrigation districts to reduce socio-economic impacts and manage the costs of maintaining and operating infrastructure into the future.

While we heard concerns about how individual irrigators may be impacted by these decisions, many more respondents recognised the greater risk to the whole irrigation community of an unsustainable irrigation network.

Explicit and genuine consideration of all opportunities to adapt irrigation districts will be part of all potential water recovery opportunities explored in Victoria that affect irrigation districts. This means the use of reconfiguration powers must remain an option.

**Action: In the development of feasibility studies and business cases (subject to Commonwealth funding) DEECA and Water Corporations will provide clear information about the manner in which reconfiguration powers may be used when exploring potential water recovery opportunities that affect irrigation districts.**

## How we work together

It is recognised that diverse methods of engagement are needed – one size does not fit all. Consultation will need to be tailored for the individual catchments.

**Action – Subject to Commonwealth funding, DEECA, Water Corporations and Catchment Management Authorities will work with communities to develop water recovery opportunities utilising a diverse range of engagement methods.**

## Other themes we heard

Through the consultation process, we heard feedback from individuals and organisations on a range of issues in addition to their views on the prospectus. This section identifies some of the key themes of this additional feedback.

### Transparency

In the next stage to identify water recovery areas and projects that will deliver the biggest benefits with the least harm, it is critical that lessons from past water recovery projects are captured and there is transparency around decision making and trade-offs.

**Action – Subject to Commonwealth funding of the next stage, delivery agencies will look at lessons from the past to inform future projects and provide regular reporting on the status and progress of water recovery opportunities investigated.**

### Commonwealth water purchases

With the Commonwealth recently opening a 70 GL open tender buyback in the southern Basin for 2024, concerns around the Commonwealth continuing to purchase rather than work with communities on a more strategic approach remain real. The Commonwealth has committed to an Expression of Interest (EOI) program for its second round of buyback intended to be executed in 2025.

**Action – The Victorian government will continue to call on the Commonwealth not to execute tenders from the 1st round of tenders or act on any EOI before working with Victorian communities on a more strategic approach to water recovery.**

## Environmental outcomes

We heard there was opportunities to improve the environmental condition of Victorian rivers and wetlands and these need to be acted upon. There were concerns raised about the Commonwealth progressing with water purchases now when the ability to effectively deliver current environmental holdings in some catchments is limited. Communities also wanted to understand the impact on Victorian rivers if downstream environmental demands were prioritised over upper catchments.

“There is no mention in the prospectus of the inability to deliver the 450 GL – 750 GL downstream to meet the environmental targets. Deliverability is the elephant in the room that no-one will discuss.”

Individual

Effective delivery of environmental water both at a catchment and broader basin scale are essential to the health of our rivers, wetlands and floodplains. It is reasonable for communities to seek further evidence on the scale and speed of water recovery as it aligns with environmental outcomes. There was also concerns around where water maybe recovered and if it would provide environmental benefit for Victorian rivers and wetlands.

**Action – DEECA will request the Murray Darling Basin Authority to provide information directly to communities on the environmental outcomes the additional 450GL is set to achieve and the speed at which water recovery needs to occur given the current condition of those areas.**

**Action – Subject to Commonwealth funding feasibility studies will look at the local environmental benefits of water recovery.**

## Flood risk

Many towns in northern Victoria are built near rivers. Communities are seeking that flood risk and flood mitigation opportunities should be considered as part of any feasibility studies and business case development.

**Action: Flood risk and mitigation options will be assessed as part of any project which is undertaken by delivery agencies.**

## Constraints

Constraints to the delivery of environmental water were raised in the submissions with varying views and levels of support for implementation of the Constraints Measures Program. Broadly we heard that Victoria should seek out opportunities to reconnect rivers to floodplains. The need for further investigations around current limitations to environmental watering, particularly in Mallee wetlands and floodplains was raised.

Victoria has recently published the Constraints Measures Program Feasibility Study, Technical Reports and accompanying technical papers to support the community’s understanding of what the constraints projects might mean for them.

These studies will inform the Constraints Implementation Roadmap being prepared by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, which will define an appropriate way forward for considering Constraints Measures across all basin states. In parallel to the Constraints Roadmap process, there may be localised opportunities for increased environmental watering within current river operating rules.

**Action – DEECA will seek funding to undertake further investigations of limitations to environmental watering and opportunities to restore flows in water dependent environments within current river operating rules.**

## Socio-economic impacts of water recovery

Respondents were supportive of the approach to achieve environmental outcomes with less socio-economic disruption by improving system operations and efficiency rather than relying solely on water purchases.

There is significant concern about the potential negative socio-economic impacts of water recovery on rural and regional communities. In particular that water recovery efforts could harm food security, local economies and livelihoods if not carefully managed. Many respondents were concerned that Victorian communities and irrigation districts would be disproportionately impacted and that negative impacts on industries and supply chains would not be managed.

**Action – The Victorian Government will continue to advocate to the Commonwealth for a strategic approach to further water recovery to minimise socio-economic impacts. DECCA will work across government including with Agriculture Victoria, Regional Development Victoria and the Department of Transport and Planning to align water recovery options with their future strategies and investments.**

# Next steps

Through this consultation we have heard a range of views on Planning our Basin future together, how best to engage communities in discussions and factors to consider in any further water recovery.

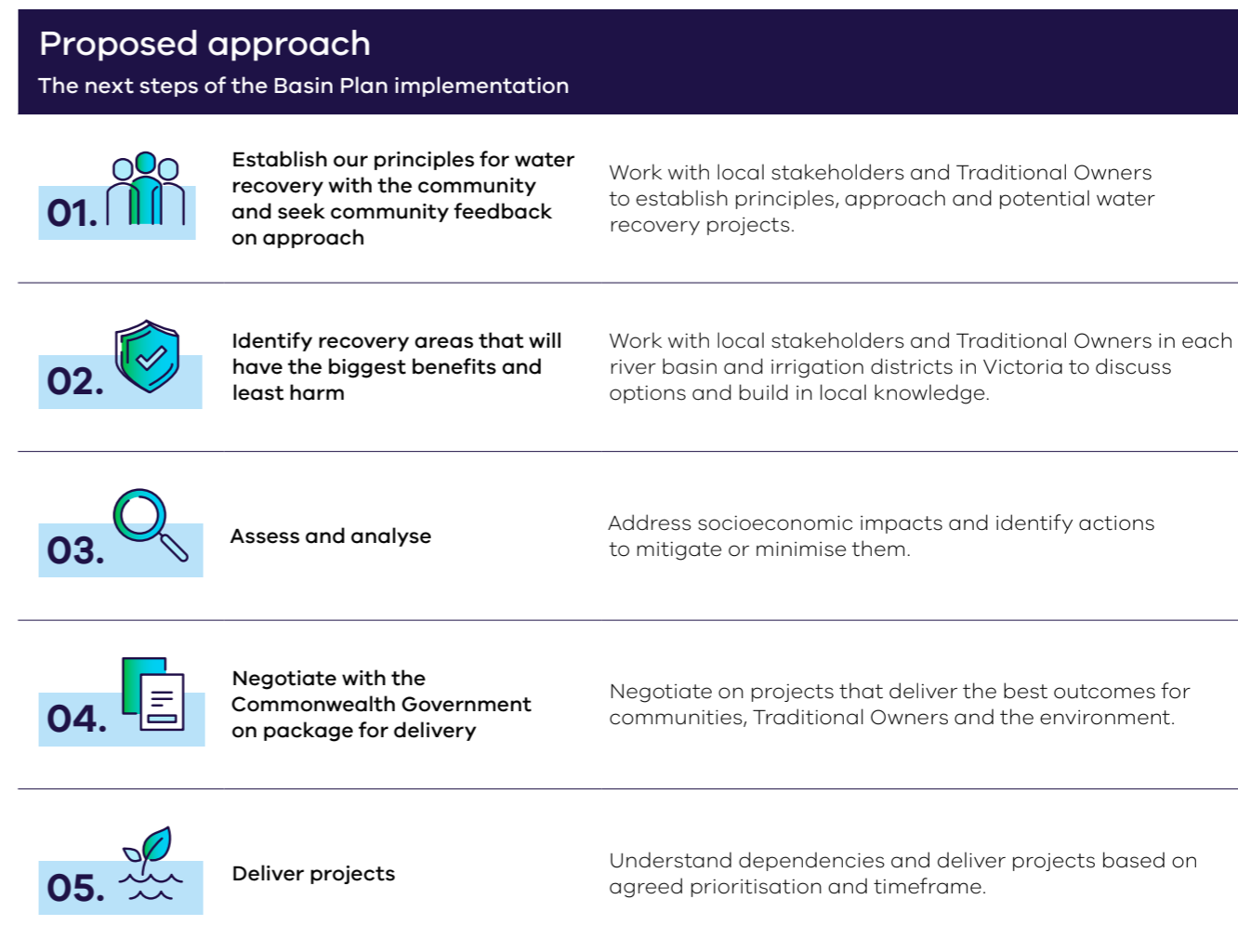
During public consultation on the prospectus, DEECA, Water corporations and Catchment Management Authorities have been identifying potential water recovery opportunities in Northern Victoria, which align with our principles outlined in the prospectus.

DEECA is preparing to submit an application for Commonwealth funding to undertake feasibility studies and develop business cases.

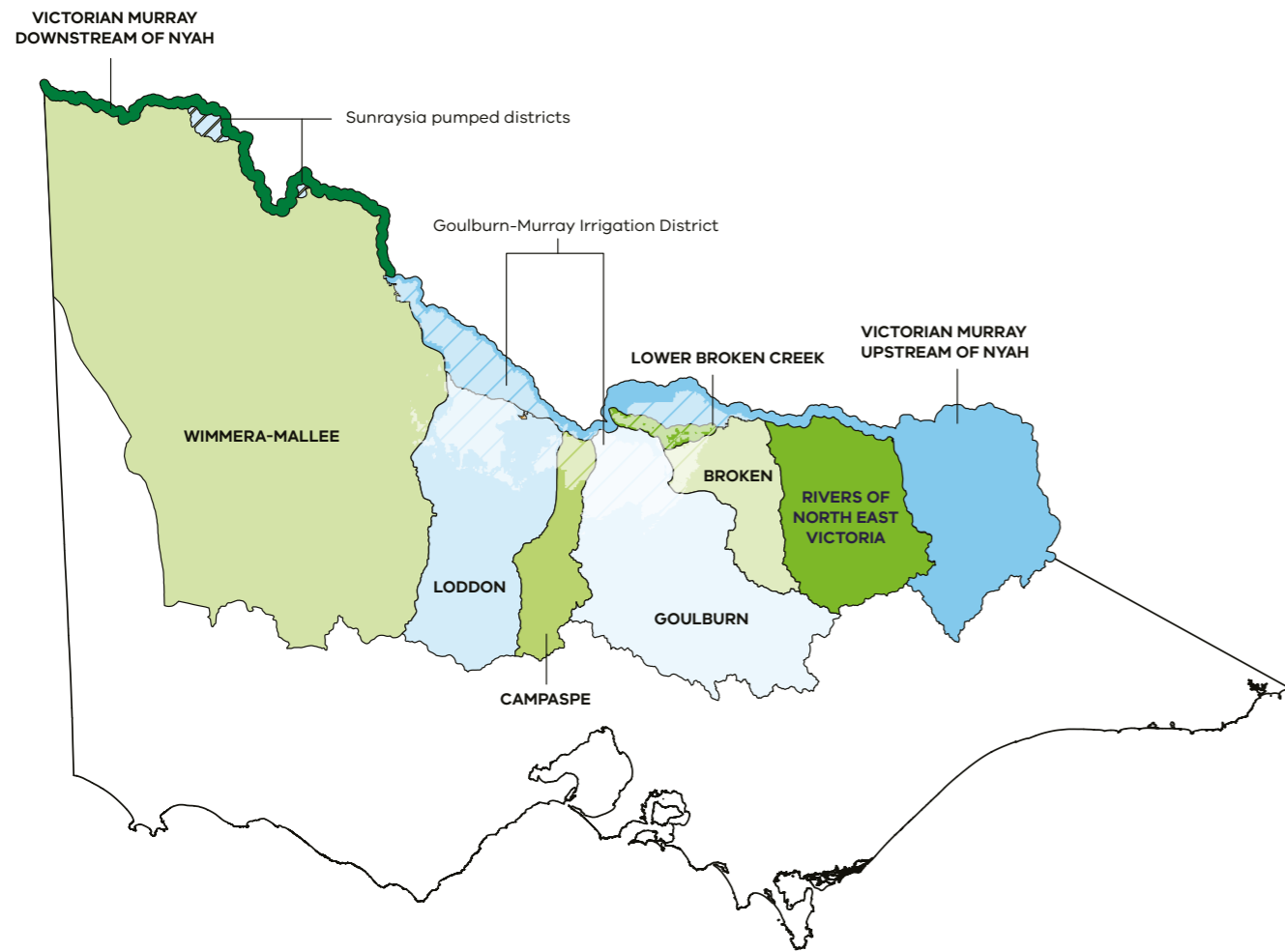
The next steps will involve working with local stakeholders and Traditional Owners in each river Basin and irrigation districts in Victoria to discuss these options and build in local knowledge (Figure 6).

The feedback and learnings from this consultation process will inform these next steps of our Basin Plan implementation approach.

Figure 6: Proposed approach



Appendix 1: Victoria's Basin catchments and irrigation districts.



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