Draft findings for southern Victoria

The Water Act 1989 requires a long-term water resource assessment every 15 years to assess whether water availability has declined or if waterway health has deteriorated for reasons related to changes in flow.

Long-term water resource assessment

Water-sharing arrangements need to be kept up-to-date. A long-term water resource assessment is a formal process to consider whether the impact of a long-term reduction in water availability needs to be shared more equitably, or whether water-sharing arrangements need to respond to a deterioration in waterway health.

The process starts with a backwards-looking technical assessment, which examines changes in Victoria’s water resources and waterway health over many years. The technical assessment is used to determine if water-sharing arrangements remain as previously agreed.

Draft findings of the technical assessment

Long-term surface water availability

The assessment found that long-term surface water availability across southern Victoria has declined by up to 21 per cent. Current long-term surface water availability is less than when it was last estimated for the sustainable water strategies (SWSs).

The main cause of declines in surface water availability is drier conditions. Upstream interception of water for storage in domestic and stock dams and plantations may also be contributing to the decline in surface water availability in some basins.

The decline in water availability has impacted on the environment, industry and other water users.

Water availability for consumptive uses (by people, farms and industry) has declined in most of southern Victoria, with percentage decline varying from 1 per cent to 13 per cent.

Water availability for the environment has declined in all basins except the Otway Coast. The percentage decline varied from 4 per cent to 28 per cent, mainly due to declines in above-cap water. Above-cap water is water that remains in a river after limits on diversions have been reached, as well as spills from storage and unregulated flows that cannot be kept in storage.

The Government anticipated drying conditions and has worked closely with water corporations and catchment management authorities to manage for these drier conditions. The Victorian desalination project can deliver an additional 150 gigalitres of water each year, alternative water supplies provide for some non-drinking uses, and the expansion of Victoria’s water grid has underpinned security of supply for towns and centres in central Victoria.

Environmental water managers carefully manage environmental water to achieve the best waterway health outcomes in the face of declining water availability.

Long-term groundwater availability

Long-term groundwater availability has declined in some areas of southern Victoria. This has had little impact on consumptive uses, and groundwater extraction has had only a very small effect on water availability for the environment at the regional level compared to other influences such as climate change.
Sharing declines in water availability

In most basins in the Central region — Barwon, Moorabool, Werribee, Yarra and Latrobe — the decline in long-term surface water availability has not been shared equally: the environment now has a smaller share of the available resource as at the time when water sharing was last assessed for the SWSs. The environment’s proportion would have declined even more had some water not been recovered for the environment, such as by creating new environmental entitlements. This indicates that a review of water sharing in the Central region may need to be considered in the next SWS.

In the Maribyrnong and the Thomson basins, the environment has the same share of the available resource as at the time when water sharing was last assessed for the SWSs. A review may also need to be considered for these basins.

In the Maribyrnong basin, the environment’s share has not changed, partly because urban water supplies are being preferentially sourced from the water grid. A review of water sharing in the Maribyrnong basin would help ensure that future operations protect the environment.

The increased volume of environmental entitlements in the Thomson basin since the SWS has not changed the proportion of water available for the environment as originally intended because it has been offset by declines in above-cap water due to the reduced availability in the basin water. Without water recovery, the environment’s share would have declined.

The western basins — Glenelg, Portland Coast, Hopkins, Otway Coast, Lake Corangamite — and other eastern basins — Bunyip, South Gippsland, Mitchell, Tambo, Snowy and East Gippsland — which have relatively small volumes of water allocated for consumptive uses, the assessment found no change in the sharing arrangements.

Waterway health

In most basins, aspects of waterway health most important for people, animals and plants have not been monitored for as long or as frequently as the assessment needed to identify long-term trends. The government’s investment in monitoring waterway health (including through the Victorian Environmental Flows Monitoring and Assessment Program) is already addressing this by improving data collection for indicators of waterway health.

The assessment could not conclusively identify changes in overall waterway health for reasons related to flow. Long-term changes in waterway health will be assessed again for the next long-term water resource assessment in 15 years’ time, at which point waterway health monitoring will be in a better position to inform the assessment.

Next steps

The draft findings show that a review of water-sharing arrangements may be needed in some river basins to determine what action is needed to restore the balance between the environment and consumptive uses.

The need for a review will be decided after feedback on the technical assessment has been considered.

Any review will be undertaken as part of the development of a SWS. This will ensure that any actions arising from a review consider both past findings and future water challenges.

The review will be open and consultative, and will consider economic, social and environmental matters, including relevant Aboriginal cultural values and uses of water.

Q Join the conversation

We invite you to go online to engage.vic.gov.au/ltwra to provide us with your feedback on the draft technical assessment for southern Victoria. ‘Open House’ events are being held across southern Victoria in October 2019. Everyone is welcome to drop-in to talk about the draft assessment, sustainable water strategies and other water-related projects.