

Irrigators and landholders FACT SHEET

The Victorian Government has been working with Traditional Owners to improve their access to water and their involvement in water management.

Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap provides an important framework to create and maintain a careful and considered balance between Traditional Owner self-determination in water access and management, and the rights and entitlements of a range of stakeholders.

What is *Water is Life*?

Water is Life represents actual and symbolic respect for the importance of Aboriginal connections to Country. Caring for Country and water can deliver thriving cultural economies and benefits for Traditional Owners, existing entitlement holders, and all Victorians.

Why was *Water is Life* developed?

Currently, Traditional Owners hold less than 0.2 per cent of all water access entitlements in Victoria. It is time to recognise that their communities have thrived here for thousands of years and honour their relationship with land and waters.

Water is Life is part of our work with Traditional Owners to increase their access to water and involvement in water management – its focus is to benefit Traditional Owners and the wider community. Importantly, this focus is not at the expense of irrigators' interests.

What does *Water is Life* propose?

Water is Life was developed in collaboration with Traditional Owner groups across the state.

In addition to Traditional Owner partnerships, the Department released a *Water is Life* consultation draft and undertook a program of targeted engagement with the water sector, water user groups, peak bodies, and community environmental groups. This included water corporations, CMAs, the VEWH, the VFF, and more.

What does *Water is Life* mean for irrigators?

Will *Water is Life* affect existing entitlements?

No, Aboriginal water access through *Water is Life* will not affect irrigators' water entitlements or allocations.

Water is Life does not propose to change permissible consumptive volumes or diversion limits – that is, the volume of water that can be removed from rivers and aquifers.

Water is Life does not propose to change or buyback existing entitlements, and the Victorian Government's strong support for regional communities and to minimise negative socio-economic impacts of the Basin Plan has not changed. Increasing access to water for Traditional Owners is intended to deliver benefits for Traditional Owners and the wider Victorian community.

Water shares or licences held by Traditional Owner organisations are subject to the same rules and rights as when they are held by farmers.

Will irrigators have to pay costs for Traditional Owners' fees and charges?

No, existing water users will not be responsible for Traditional Owner water fees and charges. Where water is extracted for cultural purposes, the Victorian Government will pay the fees and charges of water rights held by Traditional Owners.

If Traditional Owners use water for commercial purposes, they will pay an increasing proportion of fees and charges over time, until full cost recovery is reached.

How will *Water is Life* impact the role of CMAs and water corporations?

This work does not change the existing statutory responsibilities of existing water agencies, nor the requirements for agencies to consult with community when making decisions. Victoria's existing environmental water and waterway management frameworks have been developed with communities over the past 25 years and are delivered through regional partnerships between the VEWH and CMAs.



There will continue to be an essential role for the VEWH and CMAs as state agencies delivering environmental water and waterway management.

Water is Life proposes a process that may lead to the recognition of Traditional Owners as waterway managers for specific functions in certain locations.

Traditional Owners are already participating in environmental water planning and management. As this role increases, further barriers to self-determination will be identified and addressed. Any potential future legislative changes will involve engagement with Traditional Owners, water users, wider stakeholders and the community.

What is cultural water?

Cultural water means water entitlements controlled or held by Traditional Owner Nations to benefit a range of outcomes, as determined by each Nation. This can include environmental as well as economic uses. Cultural water respects existing water entitlement structures while still providing Traditional Owners rights equal to existing holders.

Like other users, any conditions on use, such as volumetric limits, will apply to any water entitlements issued to Traditional Owners, and use of water entitlements by Traditional Owners will need to comply with the requirements of the *Water Act 1989*.

For example, Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation is planning to use its recently issued section 51 'take and use' (consumptive) water licence within the UNESCO World Heritage Listed Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, which was inscribed in 2019 for its cultural values to the Gunditjmarra community.

Managing the flow of water over country is an essential aspect of the cultural values including the iconic aquaculture of Kooyang (short-finned eel).

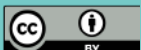
In some circumstances, Traditional Owners may work with environmental water holders and waterway managers to achieve shared ecological and cultural outcomes from environmental watering. While these shared benefits are culturally and environmentally valuable, they are not 'cultural water', because the entitlement is held by the environmental water holder rather than Traditional Owners.

How will *Water is Life* be implemented?

The Victorian Government is proposing a staged and iterative approach to implementation of the actions in *Water is Life*. Implementation will be informed by pilot projects and an adaptive approach that supports the water sector, existing entitlement holders, Traditional Owners and the broader community to work together.

How we do this, and the development of implementation options for *Water is Life*, will be informed by wider engagement with Traditional Owners, key stakeholders, and the Victorian community. Implementation will include wide consultation if any new legislation is proposed. This means that irrigators and landholders will have opportunities to collaborate on the implementation of *Water is Life*. Our approach is consistent with *Water for Victoria's* commitment to strengthen local relationships and put community at the centre of decision-making.

During this period of implementation, water corporations will retain their existing responsibilities and functions, continuing their important work of sustainable water management.



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