



Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action

Victorian Waterways Management Strategy (Public Consultation)

What we heard report

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1. Executive Summary

The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) is developing a new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy. It will guide how Victorian waterways are managed into the future.

The Department is ensuring stakeholders are engaged throughout the development process. In July it released a Discussion Starter to help shape the development of the new draft Strategy.

The consultation period ran for six weeks between 24 July to 1 September 2023, and the process involved:

- three online community conversation events, where stakeholders and the community had the opportunity to hear a short presentation about the new Strategy and ask questions
- a three-question, short answer survey through Engage Victoria
- the opportunity to upload a written submission via Engage Victoria.

The purpose of this consultation was to:

1. Detail why a new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy is needed.
2. Invite input into a new **vision** for the future of our waterways, which will help develop the new Strategy.
3. Invite early feedback on what the new Strategy needs to achieve.

The next round of formal public consultation will take place when the draft Strategy is released for public comment, expected in the final quarter of 2024. The final Strategy is expected to be released in 2025.

Disclaimer: Content about Traditional Owners roles and values described in this report are public comment and should not be considered as priorities or assertions from Traditional Owners. DEECA will continue to work with Traditional Owner partners throughout the development and implementation of the Strategy to increase their self-determination in waterway management.

Engagement results overview

A review of input across both the survey responses (see 5.2) and submissions (see 5.3) can be grouped into five overarching themes:

- water quality
- riparian and wetland protection
- minimising impacts of extreme weather
- community engagement, and
- partnering with Traditional Owners in waterway management.

Engage Victoria Survey

Q1. When you think about Victoria's waterways in the future and your connection with them, what do you imagine?

Respondents wanted to see recreational access and sustainable agriculture undertaken in an environmentally sustainable way. Partnership with Traditional Owners and transparency in water management were also emphasised.

Q2. Healthy waterways in a changing climate

There was a focus on protecting native species, research, and preparing for extreme weather events such as bushfires and floods. Governance and balanced water allocation were also discussed.

Q3. Community Connection to Water Landscapes

There were calls for investment in waterway protection and more public education on water literacy. Waterways were valued both as recreational sites and important natural assets. The importance of public access was widely expressed.

Submissions via Engage Victoria

Twenty-three submissions were received from across various sectors, including agriculture, recreational users, environmental community groups, water industry and academia, the most prominent themes are detailed below.

Citizen Science and Community Participation

Wide involvement of community groups and various agencies to maximise effective waterway management was called for by most respondents. A perceived lack of government support for community-led efforts was raised by some.

Riparian & River Channel & Revegetation

Deteriorating riverbanks and riparian zones due to past practices, insufficient actions and funding were a theme in many submissions, with calls for renewed policies, better funding, and more fencing to protect these areas. The role of revegetation was also referenced by many respondents.

Urban Waterways

Key themes included the need for updated drainage systems, protection of sensitive landscapes, and robust urban planning measures.

Legislation & Regulation

Various groups and alliances called for strengthened regulatory measures, including tighter discharge standards, greater monitoring and enforcement of agricultural chemical use, recognition of rivers as legal persons and living entities, as well as a health audit of the entire waterways and wetland ecosystems across Victoria.

Environmental Water

Some submissions proposed addressing constraints hindering the delivery of environmental water to where it is needed, including to floodplains. It was also expressed that although environmental water provides support to river systems, natural rivers are preferred, and unregulated rivers should remain connected.

Note there are further topics from submissions, detailed in section 5.3.

2. Background

Rivers, wetlands, estuaries, and their floodplains are the lifeblood of many Victorian towns and communities. From cool mountain streams in alpine areas to popular estuaries across the coast – waterways underpin the wellbeing and productivity of individuals, communities, and regional economies. It’s important that we care for them.

The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) is developing a new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy. It will guide how we manage Victorian waterways into the future.

Early feedback on a Discussion Starter was invited to help shape the development of the new draft Strategy. The final Strategy is expected to be released in 2025.

Key stakeholders will be consulted throughout the project on development of the new Strategy. The next round of formal public consultation will take place when the draft Strategy is released for public comment, expected in 2024.

The purpose of this consultation was to:

1. Detail why a new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy is needed.
2. Invite input into a new **vision** for the future of our waterways, which will help develop the new Strategy.
3. Invite early feedback on what the new Strategy needs to achieve.

The existing Victorian Waterway Management Strategy was released in 2013, providing a detailed policy framework for managing the health of Victoria’s rivers, wetlands, estuaries, and floodplains (referred to collectively as ‘waterways’). The Strategy has reached the end of its lifespan. A new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy (the new Strategy) is needed to ensure strong policies are in place for managing Victoria’s waterways, particularly in the face of our changing population and climate conditions.

A key focus of the new Strategy will be identifying pathways to increase Traditional Owner self-determination and decision-making in waterway management. DEECA will continue to work directly with Traditional Owners to determine how the new Strategy can increase self-determination in waterway management and how it can progress other Traditional Owner priorities for the benefit of our waterways and communities. Therefore, public comment on Traditional Owner involvement was not specifically invited for this stage of consultation.

Considerations for the new Strategy may include:

1. How we can continue to support the health of Victoria’s waterways

2. How we will adapt to climate change.
3. Increasing Traditional Owners self-determination in waterway management.
4. Helping communities to care for waterways.
5. Guiding the development of regional waterway strategies.
6. Considering any other areas or opportunities that come from the feedback.

3. Communications Plan

The communication plan for the consultation process was developed to successfully engage project partners, stakeholders and the community to take part in the consultation process that will ultimately help inform the new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy (VWMS).

The main communications objectives were:

1. To inform the Victorian community about what the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy is and why we need a new one, and how it will complement regional waterway strategies and programs.
2. To encourage stakeholders to read the Discussion Starter and contribute to the development of the new strategy by completing the survey or lodging a submission on Engage Victoria.
3. To attract a broad mix of community groups and stakeholder feedback on the Discussion Starter, by targeting the communications channels of project partners and others, utilising the VWMS stakeholder and community database developed by the project's stakeholder team.

4. Engagement approach and reach

Participation in Online Community Conversation Events

Methodology

The online community conversation events were held as an opportunity for the community and stakeholders to find out about the new Victorian Waterway Management Strategy (VWMS) and ask questions.

The objectives of the information sessions were:

1. To inform the Victorian community about what the VWMS is and why we need a new one, and how it will complement regional waterway strategies and programs.
2. To encourage stakeholders to read the Discussion Starter and contribute to the development of the new VWMS by completing the survey (consisting of broad open-ended questions) or lodging a submission on Engage Victoria.

5. Engagement results

5.1 Engagement Statistics

Throughout the duration of the consultation period the Engage Victoria page received 16,267 total views and a total of 2,548 unique visitors, showing high levels of engagement resulting in the below submissions and registrations:

Number of responses	
Survey	67
Submission	23
Event registration	109

5.2 Engage Victoria Survey

The purpose of the survey was to:

- Collect feedback from the community on what the new Strategy needs to achieve.
- Explore opportunities to facilitate healthy waterways in a changing climate, which will help develop the new Strategy.
- Consult on the best approach for communities to engage and connect to water landscapes.

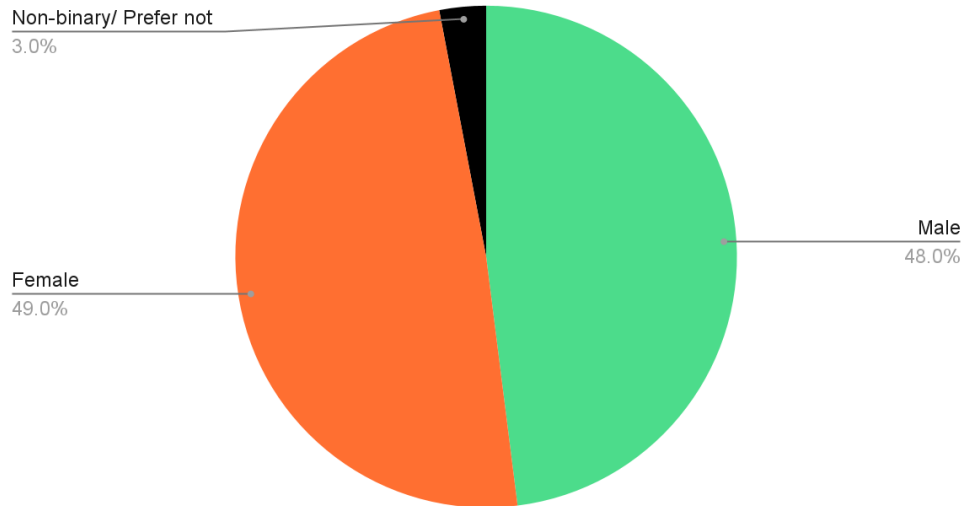
The survey consisted of open-ended questions to allow respondents to answer in their own words, and therefore the results are dependent on the amount of detail they wished to provide about the overarching topic areas. Demographic questions were also included to identify age, gender and sector.

Please note: There was no feedback invited in this consultation regarding the topic of Caring for Country: living, connected water landscapes. This is due to the ongoing partnership model

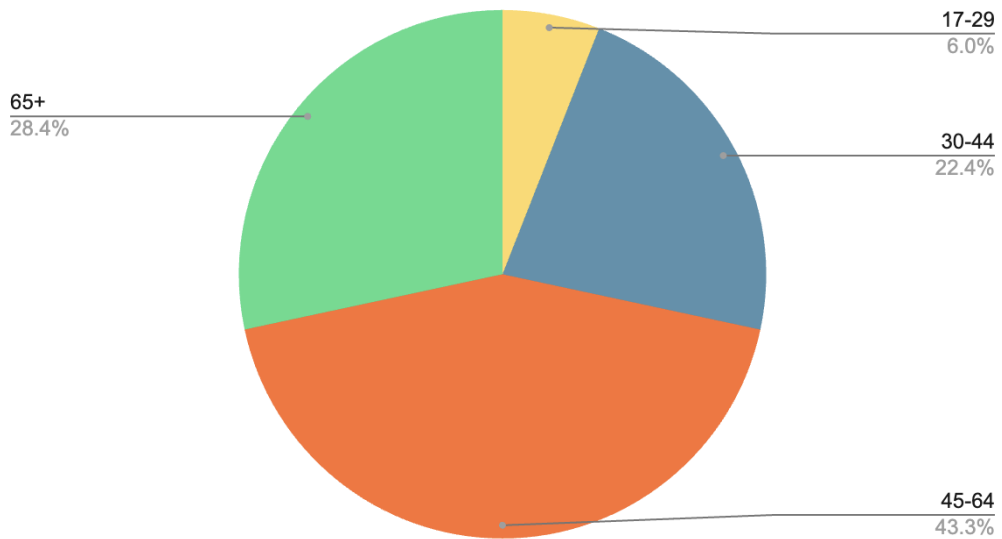
DEECA is progressing with Traditional Owner partners to be able self-determination aspirations.

Details of Participants

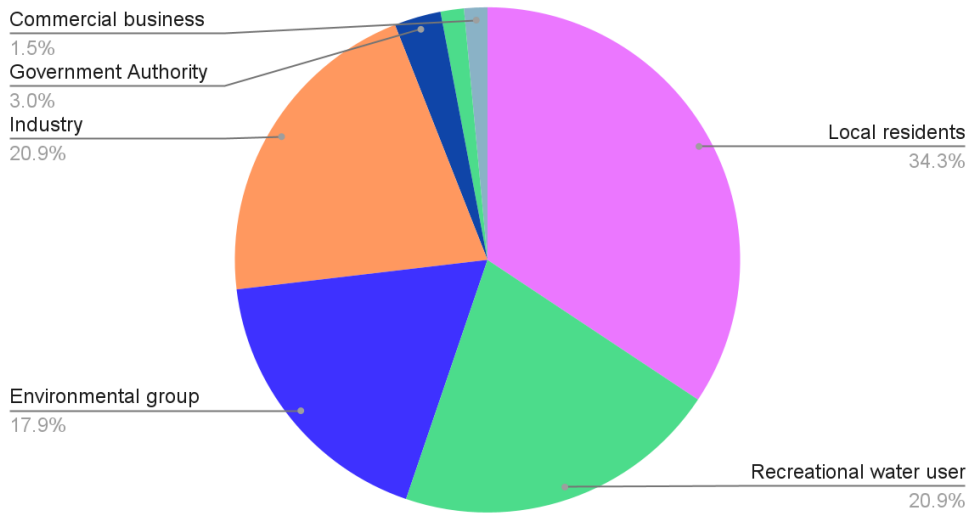
Gender



Age Group Distribution



Sector



Key Themes

Survey questions covered three areas of interest – the future of Victoria’s waterways, healthy waterways in face of climate change, and community connection.

Across all three, respondents expressed their concerns about sustainable management of waterways, areas for improvement around the current management, as well as a desire for more public access. The following word cloud was generated based on the 67 survey responses, with word size correlating to prevalence in surveys.

Some respondents suggested that the government should collaborate closely with local communities to improve management efficiency. Partnering with Traditional Owners was also mentioned as being an important part of waterway management.

“Ongoing improvement of waterway health in collaboration with all.” – Water industry

“Open transparent and inclusive management so all Victorians may enjoy access and interaction within our waterway systems.” – Recreational water user

Recreation

Most engagement respondents expressed a desire to have more public access to waterways as they provide valuable recreational value. They would like to have increased public access, provided it is done thoughtfully to protect the waterways from human pollution.

“Need to legislate to balance rights to ensure right of access; need to avoid trashing public/ government land.” – Community member

Riparian & River Channel & Revegetation

Many respondents were concerned about the sustainable management of waterways. The focus here was primarily on the restoration and revegetation of riparian areas and adequate fencing to protect waterways from livestock.

“Replanting of endemic trees, shrubs and grasses which in turn may preserve the flora and sustain what little very unique fauna we have left.” – Adjoining landholder to waterway

Q2. Healthy waterways in a changing climate

Legislation & Regulation

Many respondents stated that having clear legislation and regulation is important for ensuring healthy waterways. They believed that government and local authorities should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities in managing the waterways system.

“Clarifying and further defining roles and responsibilities for water given the changing landscape e.g. stormwater starting to be viewed as a 'resource' rather than 'waste' and therefore greater interface between private/public in harvesting and reuse. This would increase consistency in approach across councils. Increase in planning policy to protect waterways required, both directly (e.g. waterways corridor widths/setbacks) and indirectly (e.g. requiring ESD for new housing that mandate minimum infiltration and harvest requirements)..” – Local government authority

Setting guidelines to balance water allocation for agricultural and recreational use was also highlighted.

Extreme Events

Some respondents referenced the impact of climate change on local residents. With the perception that extreme weather conditions are occurring more frequently, particularly floods and bushfires, locals living in high-risk areas are thought to be experiencing a significant amount of emotional and financial stress. It was suggested that waterway management should be designed in anticipation of future natural disasters.

Floodplains

It was asserted that climate change has had an impact on natural floodplains and waterways. Some respondents mentioned the significant disruption and loss of habitat in urban waterways, including the degradation of floodplains and transformation of creeks into drains. There was a call for increased focus on habitat restoration and protection to build resilience against climate change, highlighting the importance of preserving native grasslands surrounding waterways.

“In urban environments waterways have been significantly disrupted, with a loss of both habitat, floodplain, and degradation of waterways, with many creeks and tributaries turned into drains.” – Local resident

“For example climate change will mean not only less rainfall, but less winter–spring rainfall in particular. Rainfall in the cooler months is crucial for refilling wetlands, activating floodplains and recharging groundwater, all essential processes for storing water to provide base flows in dry times.” – Environmental group

Some respondents called for further research into the protection and restoration of the settings surrounding waterways in a changing climate, as this would help mitigate risks and preserve natural waterways.

“Appropriate research completed to understand the impact of a changing climate and action plans to mitigate risks and preserve indigenous flora and fauna. For example relocation plans for fauna in estuaries before sea level rise.” – Local government authority

Water Quality

Many viewed as crucial the issue of ensuring water quality and implementing appropriate tools for waste management. One respondent mentioned that extreme weather often leads to poorer water quality. It was suggested that the new Strategy prepare for potential extreme weather events in advance and build resilient waterway systems to ensure continued water quality.

“There needs to be more and far better rubbish traps and more emphasis from the government on behalf of managing rubbish. There is so much trash and it all ends up in the waterways.” – Environmental group

Additionally, there was demand for increased use of diverse water supplies such as using recycled water to ensure resource efficiency and building stormwater systems.

“Only using recycled water in irrigation prevents livestock from accessing flowing waterways.” – Water industry

Q3. Community connection to water landscapes

Citizen Science / Community Participation

Many respondents expressed the need for more community education in water literacy, especially to educate individuals about personal responsibilities and safety around water.

“I live very close to the Yarra but many people still leave their cigarette butts right next to stormwater drains, only a 100 metres or so from where they will be washed into the river. I’ve seen examples from overseas where they have painted fish next to the drain to illustrate that it connects to the river.” – Recreational water user

Some suggested that education should not be limited to school-aged groups, but also to expand to the wider communities.

“More citizen science activities for non school age people! Retired folk should be an excellent resource!!” – Community Action Group

Recreation

Many expressed a desire to increase community access of waterways, primarily for recreational purposes. Waterways were seen as places to provide peaceful getaways and to recharge, and many respondents believed that more people should have easy access.

“Communities organically connect with beautiful natural environments, the only infrastructure required is walking tracks.” – Other

Many respondents asked for more investment in waterways protection and development, citing a belief that healthy waterways will benefit the community, adding recreational value and providing a space for relaxation.

Urban Waterways

Some suggestions for waterway protection included improving the efficiency of water storage in urban developments, restoring natural vegetation for biodiversity, and better management of environmental water.

“Preventing overflow from houses and industrial activity. Encourage the use of water tanks and rainwater. Educate on the use of rain from downpipes” – Community resident

“If we could collect, treat, and store stormwater before it is lost to the sea”. – Community resident

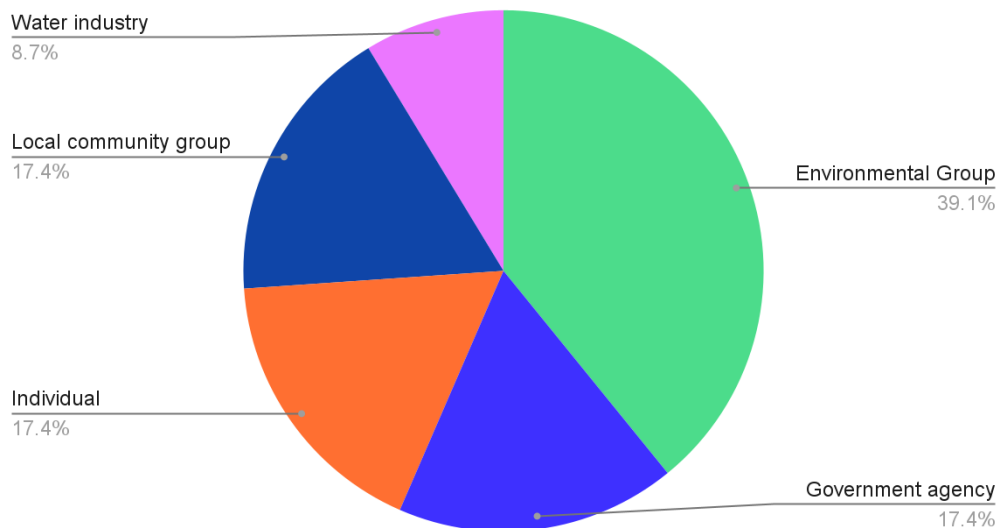
5.3 Submissions via Engage Victoria

Methodology

The Discussion Starter posed questions to prompt the community to upload their vision and feedback for the Strategy with a written submission uploaded onto Engage Vic.

Details of Participants

Sector



Key Themes

The value of Victorian waterways was a recurrent theme throughout most submissions.

***"Our water, for all Victorians is our rivers, streams, tributaries. Water is the lifeblood of all humans, fauna and flora. No-one has a greater right but we all have a need, a say and a right to clean water for all... Our waterways, harmony, purity, life."* – Environment group**

Community participation featured across all submissions, with the need for increased support from government and formation of partnerships with community organisations called for in several submissions. Further protecting riparian zones and maintenance of environmental flows were also mentioned in many submissions.

The word cloud below was generated based on the 23 submissions, with word size correlating to prevalence in submissions.

Submission wordcloud

Word size correlating to prevalence in submissions.



Citizen Science/Community Participation

The importance of community participation was emphasised in multiple submissions, with calls for partnerships with all agencies and formal stewards of water resources, educational initiatives, involvement of Traditional Owners, and public engagement for achieving healthy water landscapes, efficient waterway management, addressing issues of urban expansion, and creating a whole-of-government approach to waterway management. Community input was considered

important for improving waterway health, aligning government policies, defining waterway components, addressing funding challenges, and meeting biodiversity protection targets.

Some submissions called for greater obligations for landowners to undertake waterway restoration, and it was suggested that the new Strategy include an education component for landowners so that they understand the downstream impacts of water constraints. It was thought that public education in general would improve understanding of what is required to achieve healthy water landscapes.

Riparian & River Channel & Revegetation

Various stakeholders highlighted the degradation of riverbanks due to past practices and insufficient action and funding and asked for consideration of renewed policy and investment to improve riparian zones. It was suggested that working more closely with private landowners, licensees and land and river management agencies could assist with fostering biodiversity through holistic riverine and riparian management. There was a call for improvements in vegetation along riparian strips where climate change has led to increased water temperatures, evapotranspiration, and other edge effects. Many submissions support continued and increased efforts towards the fencing of riparian zones to allow vegetation recovery.

“Further support and investment should be provided to Landholders and volunteer environment groups to ensure that sustainable land use practices are being implemented and native vegetation is being established, particularly in riparian areas, on private land.” – Interest group

Water Quality

Various concerns related to water quality were raised, including contamination from urban development, intensive agriculture, litter, herbicides from plantations, pollution from roads, and outdated wastewater processing methods. Many submissions requested that the new strategy consider these issues by improving or maintaining the values of waterways, identifying pollution sources, upgrading processing plants and protecting river ecosystems.

Wetlands Conservation

Wetlands conservation was suggested as an area for priority within the new strategy, in particular minimising the ongoing loss of wetlands to cropping and urban development, increasing the long-term protection of vulnerable high-value wetlands, and improving the conditions of wetlands. Various organisations outlined that key priorities should include supporting landowners to protect and restore wetlands on private agricultural land, promoting wetland infiltration in urban areas, ensuring waterways and wetlands continue to provide ecosystem services and support resilience, and addressing threats from climate change.

Extreme Events

Many submissions suggested that the new strategy incorporate up-to-date science and calibrated modelling to address potential climate change impacts, including unpredictable droughts and floods, aiming to ensure the survival and recovery of priority ecosystems during variable weather conditions. Several action priorities were suggested, such as reducing carbon

emissions, enhancing tree canopies for improved microclimates, and implementing infrastructure modifications to account for changing water levels. [This could include seawalls to manage impacts of rising sea water on estuaries and coastal wetlands and installing levees to manage flood waters].

“The Victorian Government applies bushfire risk to all Victorian planning schemes through an internal and streamlined mapping, planning control and policy update process. The same approach should be applied to planning for other hazards, including flooding and coastal inundation.” – Government agency

Floodplains

Various submissions called for better protection and clarity of floodplains in the new Strategy. Suggestions included the relocation of residential developments away from floodplains and infrastructure modifications to existing developments in those areas. There were also concern over floodplains being built on and used for agriculture without regard for the ecosystem services they provide.

Recreation

Concerns were expressed about the need for dedicated water recreation areas to promote community well-being. Additionally, the impact of targeting environmental flows during school holidays on recreational fishers highlighted the importance of managing fast-flowing waterways differently to balance environmental conservation and community needs.

Environmental Water

Many submissions proposed addressing constraints hindering the delivery of environmental water to floodplains, with suggested solutions such as flood easements and planning laws for flood zones. It was expressed that although environmental water can provide relief to river systems, it cannot substitute for the variable fresh flushes natural unregulated rivers provide and that unregulated rivers must remain connected.

Urban Waterways

Multiple submissions called for the new strategy to include measures to mitigate the environmental impact of increased residential development and densification in urban areas, emphasising the need for effective drainage and stormwater infrastructure to manage impervious surfaces and the loss of green space. It was suggested that the strategy include mandatory application of water-sensitive urban design (WSUD) principles for urban developments in catchment areas, encouraging the retention of stormwater on-site and its slow discharge to groundwater. It was also suggested that the strategy encourage relevant agencies to develop additional constructed wetlands and/or contaminant traps to improve water quality and continue the extension of bans on single use plastics. Many submissions recommended that the strategy deliver a more efficient process of planning and implementing infrastructure and environmental improvement works to address the issues of demand exceeding supply, flood events, and risks to the benefits provided by waterways.

“The Planning Schemes and urban planning are vital tools in the improvement of the health of our waterways and are an essential part of any waterway strategy.” – Environmental group

Estuaries

Many submissions suggested a comprehensive and updated approach to estuary management, highlighting the detrimental environmental impacts of artificial estuary openings as they reduce resilience to urbanisation and climate change. It was suggested that the current roles and responsibilities in artificial estuary openings are unclear and complex and further work in some areas is needed to ensure clearer alignment with overarching legislation and regional objectives.

Other Topics

Wildlife

A number of submissions mentioned that the new strategy needs to ensure the well-being of wildlife returning to restored wetland and riparian zones, taking into account potential consequences such as increased vehicle road kills and predator impact, while also addressing factors affecting the habitat and protection of species like fish, amphibians, mammals, platypus and native water rats, whose habitats have deteriorated due to urban development.

“We have in theory some of the best stretches of habitat for platypus and native water rat in Victoria yet sightings have declined appreciably and indeed platypus may have been wiped out in our stretch of the river. Add to this, public health issues, adverse impacts on traditional peoples’ values and beliefs, farmers’ livelihoods and recreation.” – Local community group

Farm Dams

Various groups and individuals emphasised the need for improved methods of assessing and monitoring the impacts of water interception activities, particularly farm dams, to ensure downstream ecosystem health, with concerns raised about the increasing number of farm dams and unauthorised alterations to waterways with weirs and pondages affecting downstream users and ecosystems.

Legislation & Regulation

Many submissions suggested the strategy include strengthened regulatory measures, including tighter discharge standards, greater monitoring and enforcement of agricultural chemical use, and recognition of rivers as legal persons and living entities. Suggestions were also made for the strategy to emphasise the importance of effective regulation to prevent damage to local waterways by developers and industries and strengthening current policies to ensure effective and consistent management across all bodies. A health audit of the entire waterways and wetland ecosystems across Victoria was called for, to recognise positive achievements and identify problem areas to be prioritised for action.

The need for balancing economic opportunities with the health and integrity of waterways, and community accessibility was mentioned in some submissions. It was felt that adequate investment would be required via price increases in order for water companies to meet their social, environmental and regulatory obligations, and that incentive and market-based approaches could be used to encourage public and sector investment for priority areas.

“The remit of the VWMS needs to be clarified in the document to allow for a whole of government approach. The problem cannot be solved by the water portfolio alone.” – Interest group

6. Next Steps

The feedback will be carefully reviewed and analysed and will inform the development of the draft Strategy.

- During 2024, the Department will work with project partners, and key stakeholders on policy and strategy development. The next round of formal public consultation is expected to take place in late 2024 when the draft Victorian Waterway Management Strategy will be released for public comment.
- The final Strategy is expected to be released in 2025. Alongside this, a closing-the-loop report will also be released, detailing how responses from this engagement period informed the policy and the new vision for the management of waterways.