

# GMID DRAINAGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY



19  
November  
2021

## Community Engagement Summary

The community has generously given up their time to review and comment on the draft GMID Drainage Management Strategy. This report summarises what we heard.



# GMID Drainage Management Strategy

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF TRADITIONAL OWNERS

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and acknowledge and recognise Traditional Owners’ obligations, rights and responsibilities to use and care for their traditional lands and waters.

### INTRODUCTION

The draft GMID Drainage Management Strategy was recently released for public consultation via the Engage Victoria website.

This report documents the community feedback received.

### BACKGROUND

Effective, fit for purpose surface and subsurface drainage is essential for sustainable irrigated agriculture<sup>1</sup>.

Goulburn Broken CMA and North Central CMA have a lead role in identifying irrigation drainage and salinity mitigation needs across the Goulburn Murray Irrigation District (GMID) through the development of Regional Catchment Strategies and Land and Water Management plans. A collaborative, partnership approach to drainage issues, and a positive approach to working with regulatory agencies has proven to be an effective way to manage drainage needs across the GMID.

More recently, there have been a range of significant changes to irrigated agriculture in the GMID and external environment within which irrigation drainage service providers operate. The GMID Drainage Management Strategy (the Strategy) has been developed to provide a clear direction for the future management of irrigation drainage in the GMID. Importantly the Strategy recognises that the future is uncertain, and it has been developed using resilience principles. These principles aim to enable a more flexible approach to the way surface and subsurface drainage services are provided; as well as supporting a structured, continuous review, improvement and adaption process into irrigation drainage management.

The draft strategy released for public feedback provided information on the context for drainage management in the GMID and documented some of the changes in irrigation and drainage issues across the region since the 1990s. It also set out 37 proposed strategy directions to address the issues and challenges communities and drainage managers are facing.

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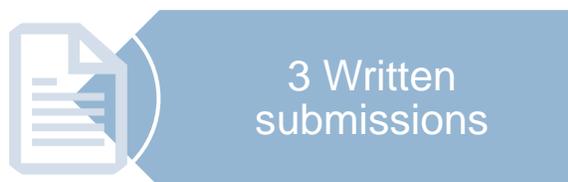
<sup>1</sup> Note that there are some areas within the GMID that have been assessed as having adequate natural drainage and do not require constructed drainage

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Management of drainage systems interacts with farms, environmental features, public and private infrastructure, and urban areas. Feedback from stakeholders is important to ensure that the future management of drainage systems has regard for the needs of interested stakeholders.

Community engagement activities on the draft strategy included:

- Meetings with local government representatives across the GMID
- Meetings with the Goulburn Broken and North Central Catchment Management Authorities irrigation and drainage advisory groups
- A webinar for Goulburn–Murray Water’s Water Services Committee members.
- Public consultation through the Victorian government's online consultation platform Engage Victoria.



Public consultation commenced on 1 September 2021 and closed on 24 October 2021. In addition to the description of the purpose of the strategy, the website provided copies of the draft strategy summary document, plus the detailed draft Strategy.

A feedback survey was provided on the [Engage Victoria](#) website, and 25 survey responses were provided.

Three written submissions were also received

The project team and the inter-agency coordination group were provided with copies of all the comments and information provided through the surveys and submissions.

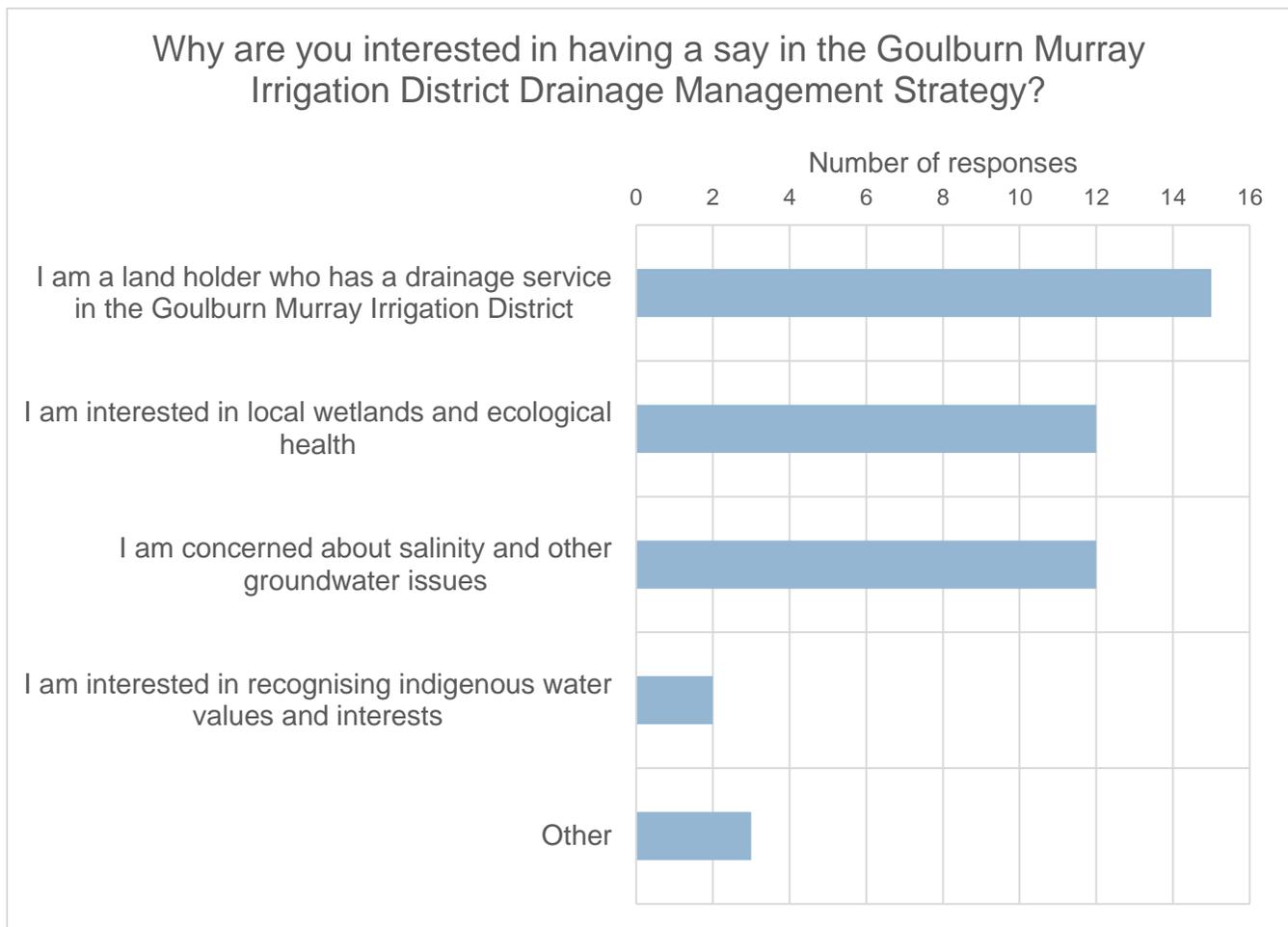
## SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

The feedback survey sought information from respondents on questions covering:

- Areas of interest in relation to drainage
- Current access to drainage services
- How important they considered drainage to be in the future
- The extent to which the strategy met their expectations
- What areas of the draft strategy need to be acted on now

The survey also provided the opportunity for respondents to add explanatory text and further detail on their responses.

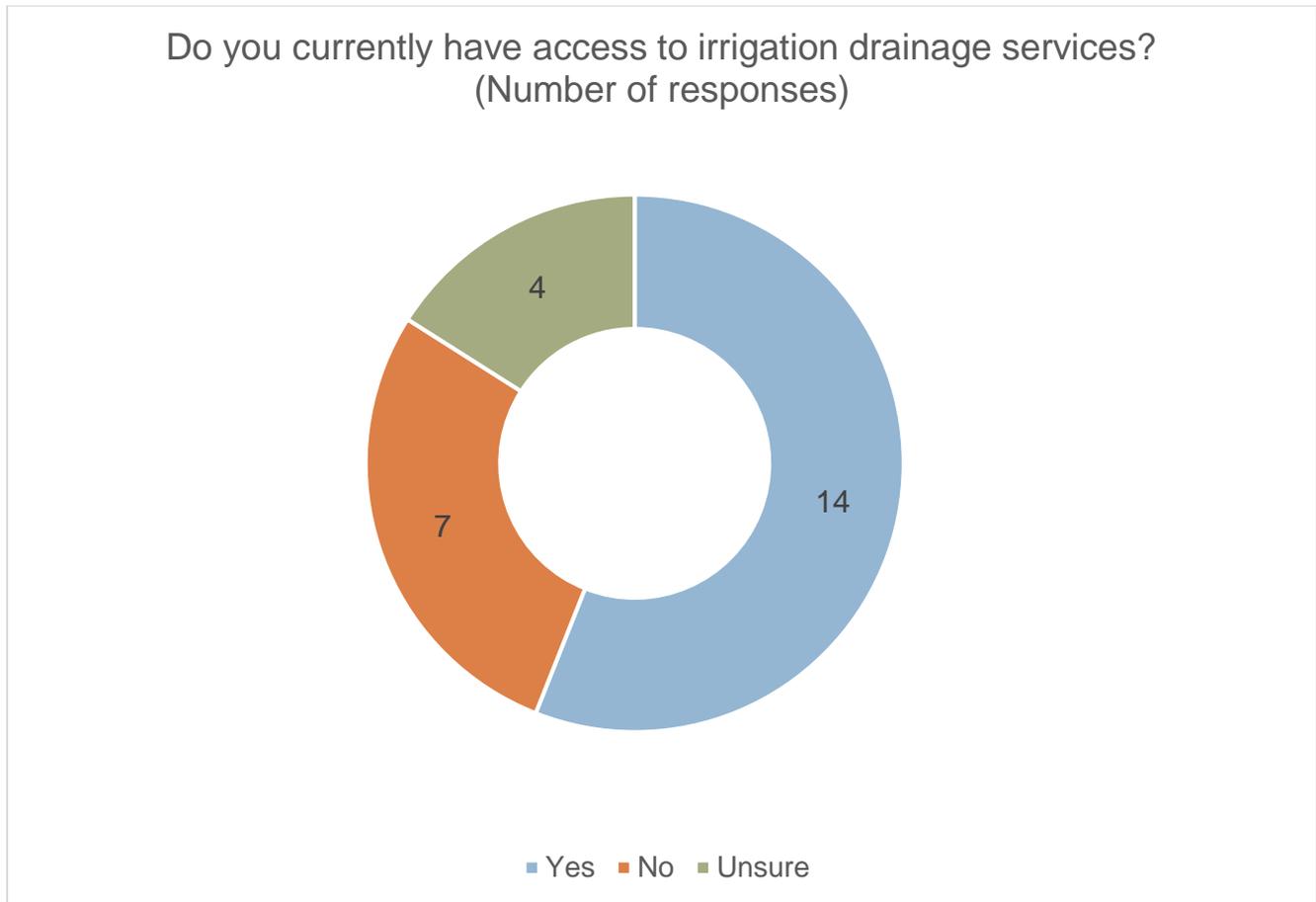
## Areas of interest



Respondents were able to select multiple areas of interest. Top responses included:

- 15 respondents (60%) were landholders that had a drainage service in the GMID.
- 12 respondents (48%) were interested in wetlands and ecological health.
- 12 respondents (48%) were concerned about salinity and groundwater issues.

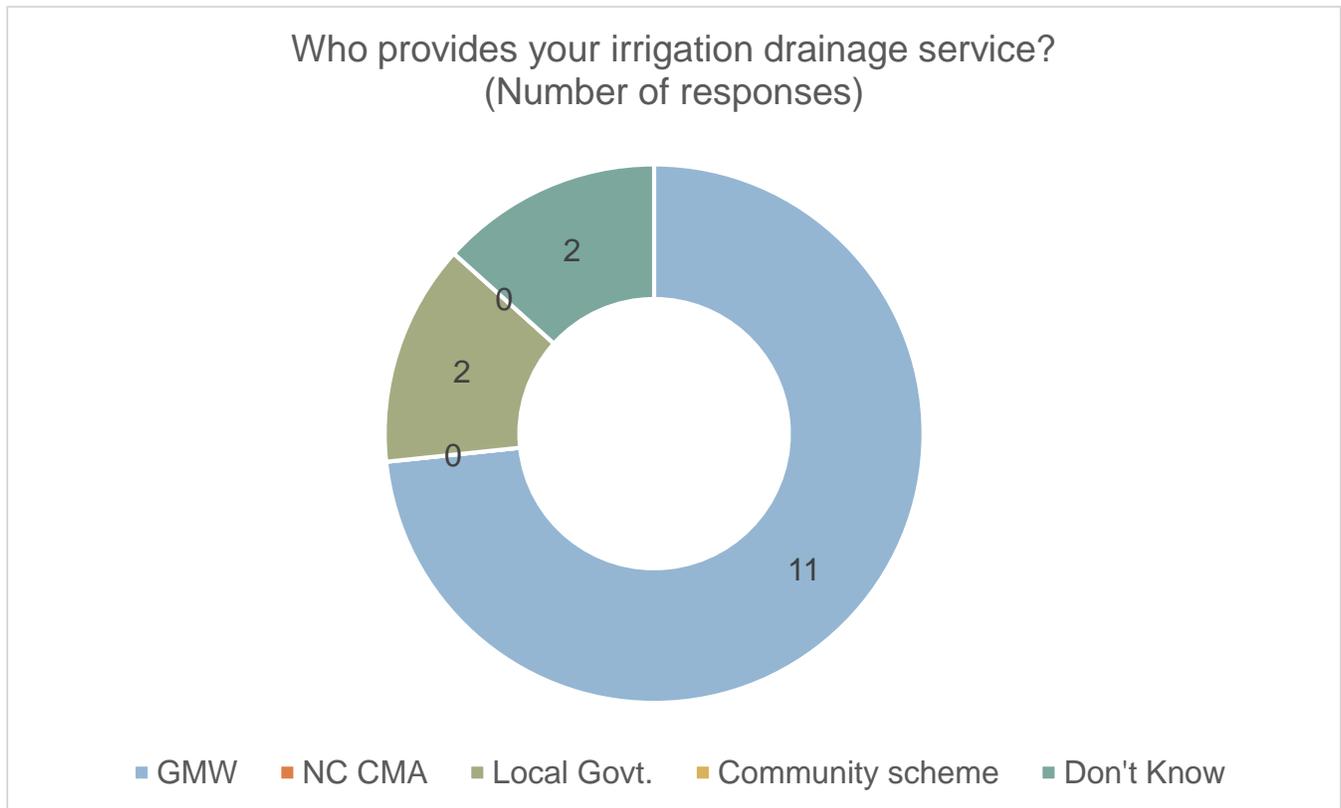
## Access to drainage



The majority of respondents currently have access to an irrigation drainage service.

- 14 respondents (56%) receive an irrigation drainage service.
- 7 respondents (28%) don't currently receive an irrigation drainage service
- 4 respondents (16%) were unsure if they received an irrigation drainage service

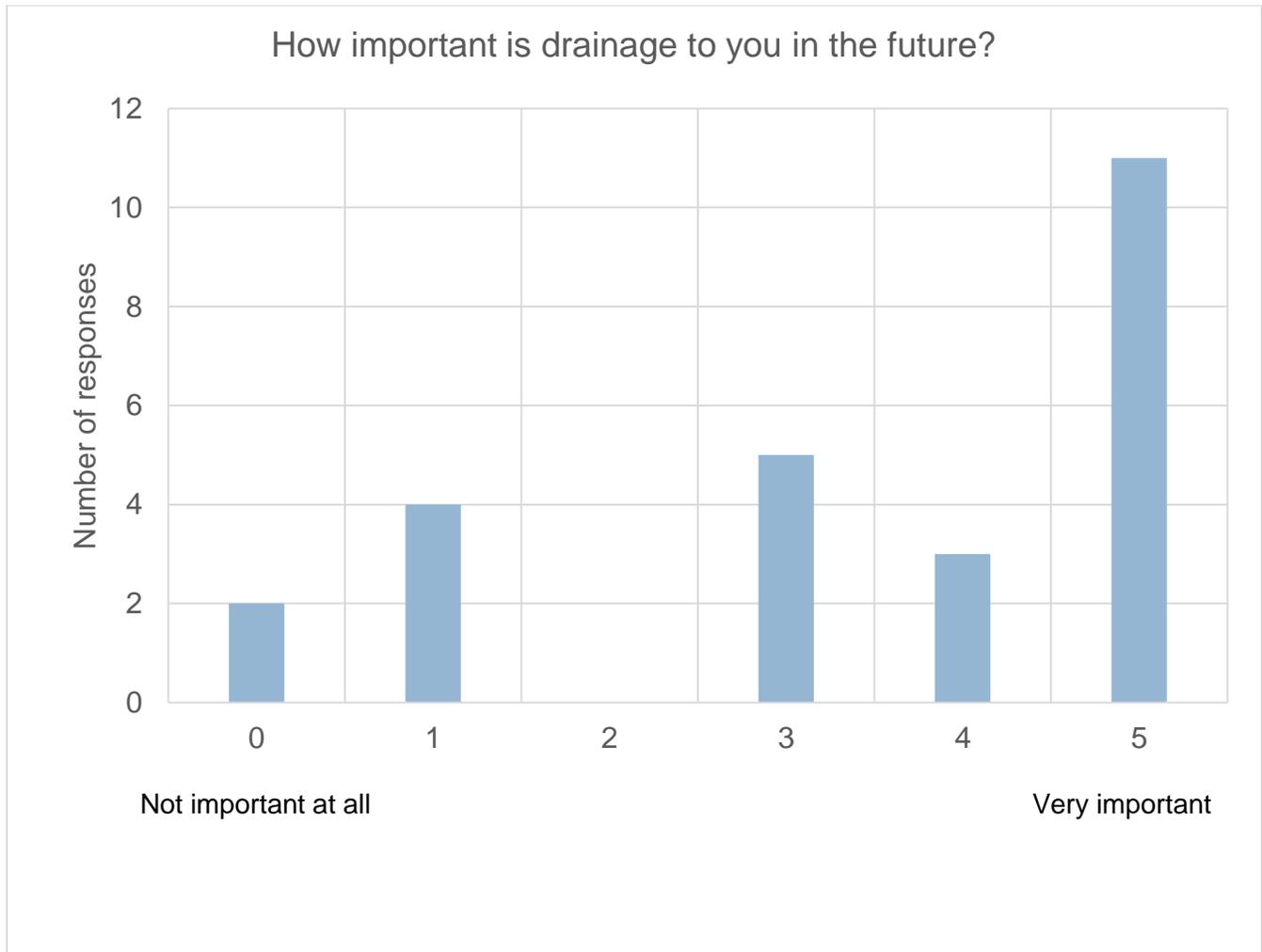
## Drainage provider



In relation to providers of irrigation drainage services, the respondents indicated that:

- 11 landholders (73%) received their drainage service from Goulburn–Murray Water (GMW)
- 2 properties (13%) received services from local government managed systems
- A further 2 landholders were unsure of which organisation provided a drainage service, including one respondent who was also unsure if their property received an irrigation drainage service at all.

## Future importance of drainage



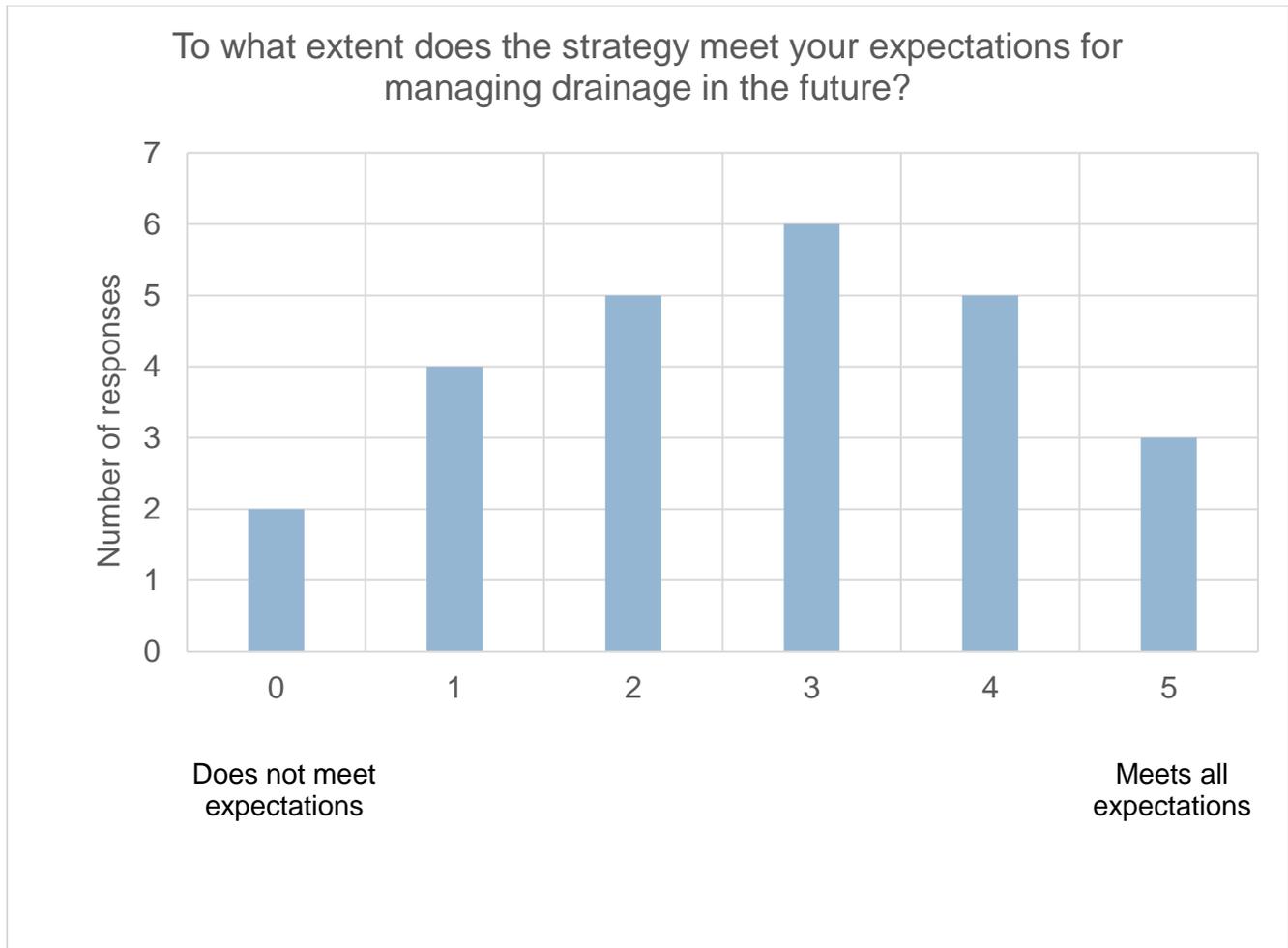
- 14 respondents (56%) rated drainage as important or very important in future (rating 4 & 5).
- 5 respondents (20%) rated drainage as somewhat important in future (rating 3).
- 6 respondents (24%) rated future drainage as not important or not important at all (rating 0, 1 & 2).
- On a scale of 0–5 the average future drainage importance score was 3.4.

There were a range of explanations provided for these ratings, including:

- Where drainage was seen as important or very important:
  - Properties need a good quality drainage system to minimise effects from heavy rainfall events.

- Experience of the damage high water tables can do.
- Drainage protects the region's economy, wetland and waterway health, improves irrigation management to reduce waterlogging and salinity, this program helps to protect the \$1+ billion of GVIAP; about 103,000 ha in the GB CMA area potentially requiring drainage and is considered to be cost effective
- Effective drainage systems that also enhance environment features and provide improved ecosystem services are essential to maintain a productive and relevant irrigation economy. The 6,000 ha of drainage offer an enormous opportunity to improve biodiversity and carbon sequestration.
- Where drainage was considered not important or not important at all:
  - Some respondents considered that on properties that are no longer irrigated there was no future need for drainage.
  - Drainage has been an issue once in 20 years. Drainage would make things worse not better.
  - Drainage provides no practical benefit and was seen as a liability.
  - Efficient irrigation management should be able to contain water on-farm, with no need for drainage.

## Meeting expectations



- 8 respondents (32%) said the Strategy met most or all of their expectations (rating of 4 & 5).
- 6 respondents (24%) said the Strategy generally met their expectations (rating of 3).
- 11 Respondents (44%) said the Strategy did not meet the expectations (rating of 0, 1 & 2).
- On a scale of 0–5 the average strategy expectation score was 2.7.

Respondents that considered the strategy met most or all of their expectations offered following reasons for this view that included:

- It is good to recognise existing drains are from a time when irrigation and rainfall was more prevalent. Moving back to an emphasis on historically natural drainage lines instead of brute forcing water to flow along paths we deem most efficient.
- Big changes have taken place. But the need has not diminished.
- I believe the points made about the declining need/value of surface drainage in the GMID are valid.
- Because it hasn't been very well maintained because of the restriction of flow to our service point.
- Drain is effective.
- I think all within the strategy is all very logical.

Those respondents that considered the strategy did not meet their expectations offered a range of reasons for this view, including:

- Not an effective strategy. Too many non-connected areas with dryland inter-dispersed.
- No water, no irrigation, no need for drainage, being charged, no maintenance being done.
- Need drainage. No new drains proposed in area.
- Did not see support for closing down sections of drainage network no longer needed.
- Not maintaining drains.
- Drains drain creeks and wetlands.
- New drains not needed. GMID is hardly irrigated.
- Upper catchment issues not addressed – habitat, revegetation, weeds and stock damage.
- Engagement with traditional owners, country, cultural heritage, employment, businesses.

## What areas need to be acted on now?



The ranking of most important areas of the draft strategy that need to be acted upon were:

1. Environmental management – 12 responses.
2. Reducing GMW O&M costs and clarifying Local government role in drainage – equal second with 9 responses each.
3. GMW drain rationalisation & decommissioning and GMW pricing structures – equal third with 7 responses each.

## Other areas for inclusion in the strategy

Respondents were also offered the opportunity to provide comments on other issues they would like to see include in the strategy. The suggestions provided included:

- Map historical areas of swampy land and see if drain water can be used to return some areas to swamp environments. My farm was part of a swamp and some iconic swamp flora still exists here e.g. tangled lignum. Encourage landowners to rethink inundated land as areas to reserve for native plantings or rewilding. If drains are decommissioned, offer the land to tree planting groups like Landcare or Greening Australia to help return it to nature.
- While environmental outcomes are critical [the strategy] needs to recognize environmental assets that are not natural and have only occurred because of over irrigation or channel seepage don't take precedent over sensible irrigation infrastructure repair or decommissioning.
- Very little flow occurs in most drains now. Drains used to be a useful habitat for some wildlife, this do not happen much now. Perhaps GBCMA could work with GMW and use drains to create habitats. This could be created at a low cost, as infrastructure is mainly already in place. Environmental water is already owned by different government bodies and could be used in selective trial sites cheaply and easily. Doing this in a proper way shouldn't compromise the main purpose of the drains.
- It will not work unless the authority has power to enforce maintenance to be carried out.
- It is all too easy for irrigators (and I am one) to want to get rid of excess surface water regardless of the consequences to other landowners. There are well established drainage principles which often get misapplied. Natural drainage is perfectly acceptable but speeded up flows are not unless there is a clearly identified and recognised disposal outlet which does not impact detrimentally on others.
- Survey of natural original watercourses to effectively place culverts and water drainage.
- Opportunity for landowners to hard pipe into the system vs open channels.
- Local shire needs to come aboard our 1st Australians come aboard also cleaning burning bush drains and etc. open up for water to get away.

- A drain closure program similar to the connections project, funded by government because of benefits to rivers. That would improve their health as much as putting more water in them.
- Right people talking on country when engagement with Traditional Owners. Aboriginal country and cultural heritage concerns. Opportunity for employment, business and water quality. When it comes to development and maintenance.

In addition, other comments about the strategy covered:

- The need for further emphasis on the impacts of climate change and the need for action to reduce and reverse climate change. This might include considering the potential for channels to be used for revegetation to provide carbon sinks
- It must be kept simple.
- The draft strategy was seen as a sound starting point for discussion by some, whilst others felt little would change.
- There was little discussion of the quality of drainage system water and whether it was fit for reuse on farms.
- There is seen to be a need to consider alternatives to drains and to reduce the extent of drains where possible and reduce costs to landholders.

## NEXT STEPS

The feedback and ideas contributed through all of the stakeholder engagement activities provides valuable insights into drainage management issues and preferences.

This information will be carefully considered by the project team as part of finalising the Strategy documents. The formal support of the agencies involved in the GMID drainage partnership will be sought prior to publication of the final GMID Drainage Management Strategy.