





# Insights from the preliminary engagement

The Victorian Government is developing the Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy. The Strategy is a long-term plan for a climate-resilient future so that even in a drying climate, there will be enough water to meet our water needs.

The Strategy is being developed through a mix of stakeholder and community input. Preliminary engagement with community and key stakeholders helped to shape the discussion draft of the Strategy. The draft also builds on recent community engagement on similar issues across the region.

Preliminary community engagement informed the development of the discussion draft Strategy. The goal of the consultation was to understand community and key stakeholders' ideas around the challenges and considerations. This first, early stage, of community engagement ran from February to May 2021 and used different methods of engagement. **Figure 1** is a snapshot of the program.



Figure 1: Preliminary engagement snapshot

Community and key stakeholders will have further opportunities to contribute to the Strategy during community consultation on the discussion draft.

In alignment with the Water Act requirements, Traditional Owners with Registered Aboriginal Party status within the region were consulted throughout the development of the Discussion Draft Strategy.

The Registered Aboriginal Parties in the Central and Gippsland Region include:

- Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation
- Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
- Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation
- Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation
- Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation

## Engagement methods

### Round tables and focus groups

Round tables are an engagement method where a group of participants come together to discuss a topic and participants have an equal right to participate. The preliminary engagement phase included a peak body group round table 11 regional round tables, 2 irrigator round tables and 9 community focus groups.

#### Peak body group round table

A roundtable discussion was held on 21 April 2021 between DELWP and Environment Victoria, Ai Group, Urban Development Institute of Australia, Victorian Farmers Federation, and the Municipal Association of Victoria.

#### Regional round tables

Five virtual round table discussions held between 27 April and 6 May with community group representatives from Traralgon, Korumburra, Colac, Ballarat and Geelong.

DELWP partnered with the Greater Melbourne Urban Water System Strategy (GMUWSS) to engage jointly at 4 Water for Life community workshops between May 11 and 19 with community representatives from across Greater Melbourne.

### **Irrigator round tables**

Two round tables were held with irrigators across the region on 26 April. Attendees represented Horticulture, Beef and Lamb and Dairy industries from both irrigation districts and dryland farming.

### **Community focus groups**

Nine community focus groups on 9th February 2021, 9th March 2021 and 1 June of around 10 people representing three regions: Geelong/Ballart, Melbourne, and Gippsland. Attendees were not associated with any water interested community groups or the water industry and had a mix of genders, occupation and cultural backgrounds, and ages spread evenly from 20s through to 60s.

## **Engage Victoria online engagement**

Engage Victoria is the Victorian Government's online consultation platform. It gives the Victorian community an easy to find, central point of contact to be involved in government decisions.

The Engage Victoria platform was used as part of the preliminary online engagement with the public. The site contained information about the key water challenges across the region and what types of actions the community considered could be included into the discussion draft SWS. A survey was available for completion between 22 April and 24 May 2021. Respondents were also provided an option to attach a written submission.

## **Previous consultation relevant to the development of the Draft Strategy**

A review of 11 previous consultation reports was undertaken, to ensure relevant feedback from previous community engagement could be considered as part of the development of the discussion draft Strategy. The following reports were reviewed:

- Barwon River Ministerial Advisory Committee: Summary of community engagement undertaken, 2020
- Summary of community engagement undertaken, 2020
- Central Region Sustainable Water Strategy Review Central Region Sustainable Water Strategy Review: Feedback synthesis report with responses, October 2018
- Long-Term Water Resource Assessment for Southern Victoria: Open Houses and online survey consultations held in October-November 2019
- Sunbury's Water Future: Community Panel report, 29 June 2019
- Sunbury's Water Future, Wider Engagement (Phase 1) report, 1 May 2019
- Sunbury's Water Future: desktop review project, developed by RPS for Melbourne Water, 12 February 2021
- Barwon Water's Water for our Future: 'What we heard' Report Phase one community engagement, August 2019 to June 2020
- Barwon Water's Water for our Future: 'What we heard' Report Phase two community engagement December 2020 to January 2021
- Waterways of the West: CALD consultation report, August 2019
- Waterways of the West: Ministerial Advisory Committee Community Consultation Summary, 2020
- West Gippsland Regional Catchment Strategy Community Consultation Summary Report February 2021

## **Feedback**

All feedback received during the preliminary engagement phase has been reviewed and summarised, with common ideas and thoughts aggregated and reported as overall themes.

This report is not intended to capture every comment, but to reflect the diversity of issues raised during the preliminary engagement phase.

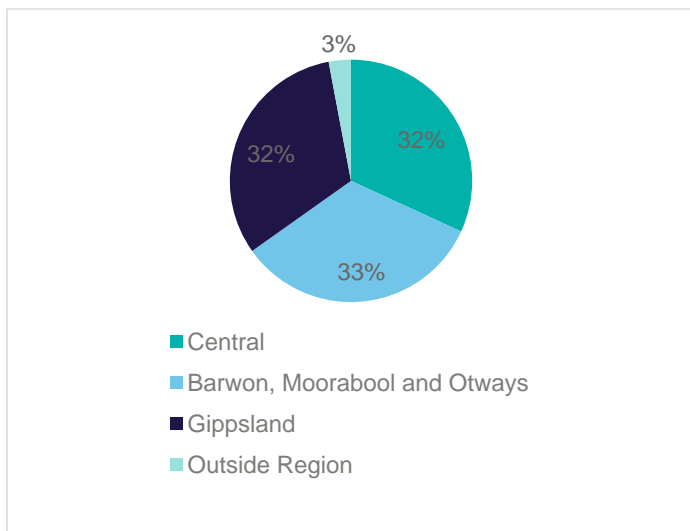
Feedback has been noted under the most relevant theme. Themes were then grouped by the topics below:

Topics
Key water challenges
How we use water efficiently
How we use all sources of water
How we share and manage water
How we grow our water supplies
Other comments

A total of 145 responses to the Engage Victoria survey were received. Engage Victoria responses have been aggregated and relevant comments in response to open-ended questions are reported as overall themes.

Some written submissions did not specifically answer the consultation questions but provided information about the organisation’s or individual’s position on the key water challenges and considerations for the future. Key points from submissions received are included in Attachment 1.

### Engage Victoria contributions by region



### Engage Victoria survey questions

1. What’s important to you when it comes to managing water in the Central and Gippsland region?
2. What do you believe are the key water management challenges for the Central and Gippsland Region?
3. Do you have any thoughts on how we could use water more efficiently?
4. What are your thoughts about how these sources of water could be better used or sustainably managed?
  - a) water from rivers
  - b) water from aquifers
  - c) water captured in rainwater tanks
  - d) water captured from drainage systems (stormwater)
  - e) water recycled from wastewater treatment plants (recycled water)
5. How important do you think it is to have healthy waterways and thriving native plants and animals both now and for the future? (rate from 1 to 5)
6. Should we reduce our reliance on rivers to supply water for cities and towns by increasingly investing in manufactured sources of water? (yes, no, unsure)
7. What help do communities need to better enjoy the waterways across the region?
8. Do you have any other feedback you would like to share about the development of the Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy?

# What we heard

## Key water challenges

- Stronger management of waterways, aquifers, and forests.
- We need water availability and quality to manage demand under population growth, urbanisation, climate change and disruptive events.
- Rehabilitation of Latrobe Valley coal mines
- More long-term water planning.
- Find additional water for agriculture.
- Review water pricing.
- Improve communication and transparency of water costs and investments.
- Increase water efficiency.
- More use of alternative<sup>1</sup> water despite regulation and policies barriers.

### Engage Victoria open-ended responses

33% of respondents mentioned better management of waterways, aquifers, and forests.

17% of respondents mentioned water availability and quality to manage demand under population growth, urbanisation, climate change and disruptive events.

17% of respondents mentioned the need for long-term water planning that balances water user values and needs while offering alternatives that are affordable.

## How we use water efficiently

- Increase the price of water usage per kilolitre and reduce services charge to encourage more efficient water use.
- Transparency in reporting water use for different users to encourage use in a more efficient way.
- Other ideas to save water included: a) commitment to leakage reduction; b) use recycled water for

mine rehabilitation, irrigation, watering parks and sport fields, and industries; c) improve farming practices; d) encourage homes and businesses to become more water efficient; e) support ongoing research and education programs and behaviour change, f) store excess water in flooding events and use aquifers as storage; g) permanent water restrictions; and h) enhance regulation and compliance.

## How we use all sources of water

Most of the reports and respondents of Engage Victoria survey agreed on the need to increase use, quality, and reliability of recycled water, stormwater harvesting and rainwater tanks.

### Other key themes include:

- Mandate rainwater tanks, stormwater and recycled water for non-potable uses, particularly for new residential and industrial developments, agriculture and Latrobe mine rehabilitation.
- Respondents mentioned the need to balance decisions about mandatory rainwater tanks versus recycled water via purple pipes (ie no point doing both for the same location).
- Precinct scale trials, research and more education to facilitate the use of alternative water
- Develop an efficient risk system to treat stormwater into different water grades as demand requires and offer capacity to accommodate regional excess for treatment and resale.
- Strong support of initiatives, subsidies, and rebates to re-use water but the price should be low.

<sup>1</sup> Many responses referred to 'alternative water' which is one or all of the following: recycled water, stormwater and desalinated water

Engage Victoria question: ‘Should we reduce our reliance on rivers to supply water for cities and towns by increasingly investing in manufactured sources of water?’ (yes, no, unsure)

- 75% of Engage Victoria respondents of respondents agreed to reduce reliance on rivers to supply water for cities and towns by increasingly investing in manufactured sources of water (Figure 2).

- Urban development is very significant in the west of Melbourne and in the areas hardest hit by climate change, but drainage schemes are not working in these areas. This requires better support for regional councils as they have sole responsibility for stormwater drainage and can't cope with the scale and pace of infrastructure required.
- How we share and manage water
- Importance of a holistic region-wide approach that balances uses rather than just ranking options. Also, better communication of shared benefits through social and environmental lenses to reach broader audiences.
- Environmental health and recreation could mutually benefit with strict regulations on pollution and nutrient outflows.
- Policy should reflect differences in irrigation districts as one-size does not fit all. A review of why people can buy water shares in a closed irrigation system, and don't have use it or make it available to agriculture or environment was suggested.
- Urgent review of water share entitlements outside urban areas so the price is reasonable for all users.
- Communities could better enjoy the waterways by a) increasing education campaigns on water issues at local scale and what, where and how to enjoy waterways.; b) supporting citizen science through local communities' groups projects and restoration activities; c) improving recreation infrastructure is

relevant to boost mental health and increase connection with waterways.

Engage Victoria Question: ‘How important do you think it is to have healthy waterways and thriving native plants and animals both now and for the future?’

- 96% of Engage Victoria respondents believe it is important to have healthy waterways and thriving native plants and animals both now and for the future

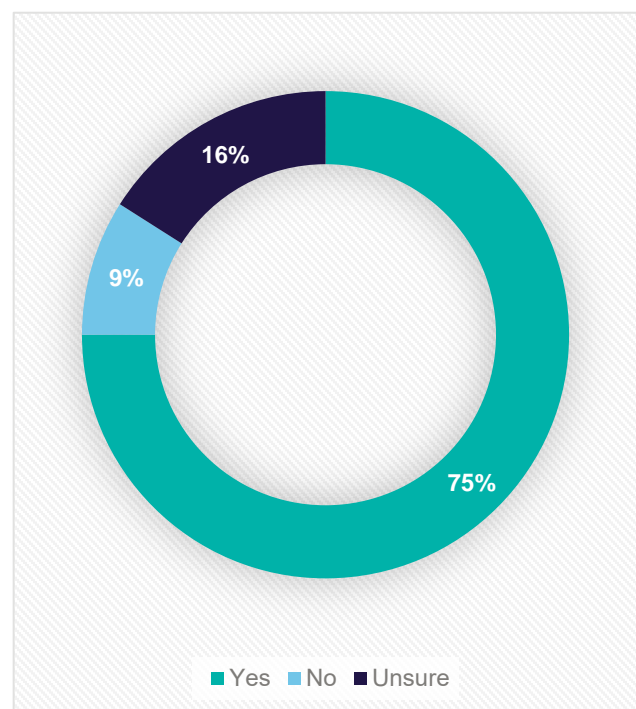


Figure 2: ‘Should we reduce our reliance on rivers to supply water for cities and towns by increasingly investing in manufactured sources of water?’ (yes, no, unsure)

Engage Victoria open-ended responses about the help that communities need to better enjoy the waterways across the region

- 9% of respondents mentioned a preference for the protection of waterways values over community access for leisure.

## How we grow our water supplies

- Agree we need to grow our water supplies to sustain the growing population.
- Better use of all types of water resources.
- Reduce reliance on rivers and aquifers and consider options that fit within a sustainable or environmentally conscious theme.
- Dams were raised but feelings about them were neutral, however a lack of understanding as to why we are not building more dams was expressed.
- Strengthen the links between land-use planning and waterway management and more flexibility in the use of all types of water sources.

## Other comments

- The Strategy can bridge knowledge gaps and test new approaches to strike a better balance for water users. Some research gaps are the understanding of Ramsar wetlands, climate change adaptation strategies or natural sequence farming techniques.
- General support for government to intervene as long as it is fair and equitable. To do this, it is important to improve existing decision-making frameworks, not develop a new framework.
- Analyse consequences of moving the water market to the south and decide whether there are ample recreation opportunities at reservoirs, we need irrigation for food.
- More transparency around the concept to use recycled to potable water and neutralise politicisation of sustainable water sources.
- Add information of agriculture use levels in the region, channel relining, ethics of alternative water and separate industry including manufacturing from urban water in the draft Strategy.

- Consider building a modern stand-alone system for growing food, finalise upgrades in irrigation systems and more co-investment in on-farm storage.
- Consider how to use Municipal Association Victoria and local councils to assist with implementation and getting any reforms through on-ground as relevant.

### Engage Victoria open-ended responses

- 63% of respondents mentioned that water from rivers could be better used by protecting and restoring habitats.
- 41% of respondents mentioned aquifers could be better used or sustainably managed through cautious management, monitoring and regulation.
- 16% of respondents explicitly mentioned recycled water to potable reuse.
- 14% of respondents think water from aquifers should not be used.
- 12% of respondents mentioned desalination plants as a legitimate way to increase water supply, citing their main concerns were energy use and costs.
- 12% of respondents do not believe rivers should be a source of water supply.
- 7% of respondents recommended using alternative water sources such as recycled water and stormwater so it is possible to increase river flows.
- 8% of respondents mentioned aquifers should not be used as storages facilities or recharged with recycled water.
- 8% of respondents would like more funding for aquifer research.



## Attachment 1 – Key points from submissions received

Submissions received from	Key points
Batesford Fyansford Stonehaven Landcare Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This submission raises issues in the Moorabool River linked to Adelaide Brighton Quarry and future house developments, including an ornamental lake</li> <li>• The group nominated the key issues as: use and abuse of environment assets by developers; and lack of adequate or enlightened government legislation.</li> </ul>
The Gippsland Environment Group (GEG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DELWP must be aware that the available water resource cannot service the current range of demands, let alone future demands. Yet there appears no consideration of limiting population growth and limiting the expansion of irrigation in Gippsland</li> <li>• GEG believes there is a lack of planning and prioritisation of water allocation and distribution of the resource. The expansion of the Macalister Irrigation District can affect Gippsland Lakes ecology, economy and community</li> <li>• Concerns about \$500,000 of Victorian government funding for the expansion of Macalister Irrigation District</li> </ul>
Friends of the Barwon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The submission raises the effects of climate change, past over-extraction, and future population growth in Barwon and Moorabool basins</li> <li>• Environmental entitlements and flows for Barwon and Moorabool basins must be increased while consumptive entitlements should decrease. Finding an alternative source of consumptive water is urgent.</li> <li>• Escalate monitoring of groundwater and surface water harvesting and their impacts on river condition.</li> </ul>
Friends of Steel Creek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The strategy should ensure that waterways and aquifers are recognised as living entities. Therefore, the strategy cannot focus on providing water for human consumption to the detriment of natural ecological systems and using water as a tradable commodity</li> <li>• Community needs to be educated on population growth and a drier climate as the main water challenge is to use water more efficiently. It is important to return water to riverine ecosystems and be cautious on the use of aquifers.</li> <li>• Sophisticated treatment systems and large-scale storages are required to use stormwater and recycled water.</li> <li>• The health of riverine ecosystems must be the primary driver of water policy. Agreement of using alternative water options to supply water rather than continued exploitation of rivers.</li> <li>• Prioritise control of extractive licenses granted by water authorities.</li> <li>• The community requires more information and education of groundwater and waterways.</li> </ul>
Friends of Latrobe water Inc (FLoW)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor regulatory management, enforcement and oversight of wastewater discharges, legacy pollution from gold mining and land use hierarchy of priority based on imprecise perceived economic benefits.</li> <li>• Complex mix of State and Federal policy settings, regulators, instrumentalities resulting in significant crossover and lack of coordination and clarity of objectives, jurisdictional responsibilities, and management</li> <li>• Critical assessment is required of quality and quantity of waterways and aquifers and irrigation allocation, infrastructure, and practices.</li> <li>• Stream diversions and over extraction should be avoided and establish legal standing for rivers to ensure cumulative impacts are considered.</li> <li>• All groundwater extractions should be regulated, and market priced accordingly to deter overextraction.</li> </ul>

Submissions received from	Key points
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No new entitlements should be granted if entitlement is not considered to be perpetual or an open-ended share of the pool</li> <li>• Consider extremely important the conservation of waterways and use of desalination to reduce reliance of river for supply.</li> <li>• The submission highlights the incremental expansion of salt wedge from deep dredging of lakes entrance mouth into the Gippsland lakes.</li> </ul>
Hume Council Submission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recycled water to agriculture should be the priority over farm dams, particularly where the infrastructure is existing.</li> <li>• Recycled water to agriculture schemes should be developed as a priority to reduce extraction from waterways and ensuring a sustainable water supply for this important industry.</li> </ul>
Environmental Justice Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priorities are ecological integrity and health of water ecosystems and resilience and adaptation to climate change.</li> <li>• Key challenges are climate change impacts, contradictions over water resources policy, pressures for increased water diversions for irrigated agricultural and lack of transparency in use and regulation of water.</li> <li>• The Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy needs to set out pathways to greater environmental sustainability, in the context of risks to consumptive use and the environment and the need to innovate in relation to the former.</li> <li>• Information collected and disseminated for the purposes of monitoring and regulating water diversions and use is a must to improve transparency in use and regulation of water.</li> <li>• Water markets are only relevant in the consumptive pool where there are clear mechanisms like public availability of all water information associated with rights, infrastructure, and actual water use via telemetric systems</li> <li>• There is a need to reform the Environmental Water Reserve in order that it more effectively and clearly aligned to water ecosystem health and enhance the legal status of environmental water.</li> <li>• Government needs to establish coherent policy on urban stormwater capable of traversing the various treatments of this water source.</li> <li>• Victoria needs to develop a similar regulatory framework and look towards implementation of recycled water projects within the lifetime of the upcoming Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy.</li> <li>• Manufactured water is a necessity if Victoria is to meet water use demands and retain acceptable standards of river health and environmental sustainability in water management.</li> </ul>
Friends of Merri Creek (FOMC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The task is to balance human uses with ecological limits, sustaining the environment is the key challenge</li> <li>• Victoria needs to consider legislative reform in which natural ecosystems are recognised as legal entities</li> <li>• Australians are among the world's highest consumers of water; the people of Victoria need more leadership and education to encourage more sustainable water usage</li> <li>• Friends of Merri Creek oppose further extraction from waterways. It is a fallacy to believe that the extraction of water from aquifers is sustainable since the gradual dropping of water tables will have devastating impacts on waterways.</li> <li>• Further regulatory and policy reform is required to encourage the installation and use of rainwater tanks</li> <li>• A land use planning system, which reverses the damage of "urban stream syndrome" is urgently required</li> <li>• We urgently require mandated protections for the environment, community education and the rapid introduction of water recycling and urban harvesting and reduced demand on waterways for consumptive uses.</li> </ul>

