

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Thursday 8 June 2023

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell



**WITNESSES**

Ms Harriet Shing MLC, Minister for Water,

Mr John Bradley, Secretary,

Ms Helen Vaughan, Deputy Secretary, Water and Catchments,

Mr Andrew Fennessy, Executive Director, Statewide Infrastructure and Rural Strategy,

Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director, Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns,

Ms Alieta Donald, Executive Director, Water Resources Strategy,

Ms Deb Brown, Executive Director, Partnerships and Sector Performance,

Ms Bronwyn Di Carlo, Executive Director, Finance, and

Dr Graeme Emonson, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Finance, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream today and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Water the Honourable Harriet Shing and officers from the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. Minister, I invite you to make a brief opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee members. I would like to begin today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet, the Wurundjeri and Woiwurrung in this part of the world, but the traditional nation owners and custodians of the oldest continuous culture on earth all over the state, and I acknowledge the enduring connection to water and connection to the spiritual basis upon which much of traditional owner identity is forged.

**Visual presentation.**

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you for the opportunity to introduce the water portfolio, and I am joined here by witnesses who will assist me in the examination and discussion of the budget achievements and challenges and also any questions of course that the committee might have.

The presentation you will see is beginning, as it should, with an examination of the October 2022 floods. This flooding event occurred in the context of a triple La Niña event – unprecedented following the last such occasion in 1900. This was three years of record high rainfall and presented a range of challenges not just within the water portfolio but across the whole of the Victorian government. This was a challenge around being the ninth-wettest year on record and the fourth-wettest year for the Murray–Darling Basin, and there was record-breaking rain across many regions in Australia.

This flooding damaged or destroyed more than 3500 homes across Victoria. As at 25 May this year 285 people remain in emergency and temporary accommodation, and in Maribyrnong more than 600 properties were damaged and destroyed across those three LGAs. We have seen an estimated 589,000 hectares of farmland impacted, and more than 210,000 hectares of public land. We have seen more than 220,000 hectares of field crops lost, damaged or destroyed; 150,000 tonnes of hay or silage lost; and 12,000 kilometres of fencing damaged. Fifteen thousand livestock died, and horticultural orchards were heavily impacted.

Seven out of the nine CMA – catchment management authority – areas and eight out of 18 water corporations were impacted. This leads me to a really important part of the discussion that I am really keen to have today around interoperability and the preparedness that was enhanced greatly because of the work that happened right across multiple sectors and multiple levels of government.

Within water we saw that there were more than 220 incidents and events responded to within the sector. These included water service disruptions; wastewater service disruptions; additional wastewater discharges; water quality issues; multiple instances of inundation and damage to water infrastructure – for example, sewage pump stations; dam safety events – mostly privately owned within affected areas; fish death incidents; and more than 71 different sewer spill events. These are issues which impact upon communities in a range of ways, including as they relate to public health, to amenity and to the capacity to remain or return home.

We saw that the readiness arrangements that were in place through DEECA and in partnerships within the emergency management plan served us well around the ongoing work to bring people together.

Of key importance is the fact that one agency cannot undertake all aspects of flood management alone. This requires people to work together in preparation, response and recovery, and we saw continuous improvement following previous flood events to extend the capability and enhance the responses that were provided. We saw asset protection works take place. We saw an incident management team established, a water cell within the State Control Centre and staff from across government departments, water corporations and CMAs working within incident control centres and out and about in the community providing access to information and support. Temporary sanitation services were provided to residents after the inundation of the Rochester sewerage system that was operated by Coliban Water, and we saw longer term solutions implemented within eight weeks. We had portable hydration stations set up. We made sure that there was a portable drinking water trailer where there was a potential compromise to water quality in Echuca, alternate water supplies were secured in Cohuna and boiled water notices were responded to following poor water quality issues. And DEECA also worked very closely with and continues to work with landowners, regional staff and dam safety experts to address private dam safety concerns at over 26 dam locations across the state.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We will now go to Mr O'Brien for the first 7 minutes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister.

**Harriet SHING:** Hello, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Welcome back.

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I am not sure if the Secretary or Ms Vaughan might be the best one for this, but budget paper 5, page 20, lists the dividends from the water corporations – about \$112 million on the coming financial year – but I am wanting to know how much there is coming out of the metro water corporations in terms of capital repatriations.

**Helen VAUGHAN:** I will just find the right page here, Mr O'Brien. Thank you for your question. So in terms of capital repatriations, as you rightly point out there are dividends and also capital repatriations. This relates to the excess equity that is transferred to the state, and it comes actually through Treasury, so they organise that for us. And I do not currently have the figure right in front of me.

**Harriet SHING:** I am happy to provide that information if you would like there, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** If you have got the figure, Minister, I would love to hear it.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes. So dividends based on 2021–22 totalled \$73.7 million.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Hang on, I am talking about capital repatriations, not dividends.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes. So this comprised a dividend of \$25.19 million, and I am happy to take you through the proportion of dividends that were provided around metropolitan household water bills if that is what you are after.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, I am after the capital repatriations from the metro water authorities, and I am actually asking for next year and the forward estimates.

**Helen VAUGHAN:** We did provide capital repatriation for last year, as you know. I have not actually got the forward estimates here in front of us, but as you know, it is the transfer of capital. It does not actually result in any increases to customer bills or reduce the services for customers, so it is very much about a transfer of funds in. It does not also impact on the corporations' investment in capital projects. Whilst I have not actually got the actual number in front of me, Mr O'Brien, it is a separate process and does not impact on customers or the corporations' investment into capital projects.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Can I ask: if I go to budget paper 5, page 87, on the administered items statement there is a line item there for 'Other revenue and income' – is that where it might be? Does anybody know?

**Harriet SHING:** Deb? Unless you wanted to continue, Helen.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** There is a figure there of \$457 million for 2023–24. Is that related to the repatriations, or is that not it?

**Deb BROWN:** I am not sure, I am sorry.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Could I ask someone to take on notice what the repatriation figure is for 2023–24 and the forward estimates as well?

**Harriet SHING:** That is a matter perhaps which the Treasurer may have addressed when he appeared before you, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You will be surprised to learn I did not get time to ask him that, Minister.

**Harriet SHING:** You did not get time?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So as much as the Treasury will receive it, it will come out of your portfolio, so I would like to know.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, no, because of the fact that it comes back into consolidated revenue it is a matter for the Treasurer, so on that basis we might see whether –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But where does it come from?

**Harriet SHING:** This is about the fact that it is then redistributed from consolidated revenue, so what we might do –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I know where it goes. The question, Minister, is: where does it come from? It comes from the Melbourne water corporations. Surely as that is your portfolio, you can tell me how much is being repatriated out of the capital of those organisations back to Treasury.

**Harriet SHING:** So consolidated revenue, as I said, is a matter for the Treasurer.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It is where it goes. It has got to come out of the water corporations. Can I get on the record that you will take it on notice and give me that?

**Harriet SHING:** Well, I can give you the dividend figure. I am very happy to do that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, I am asking about the capital repatriation.

**Harriet SHING:** And I am very happy to talk to about the interim dividends and the way in which they have been based on earlier results and how that has –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I have already made it clear three times, Minister, that I am not interested in dividends at this point. I am talking about the capital repatriation, which Ms Vaughan has given us information on.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, it appears to me the minister has answered your question. She has said it is a question for the Treasurer. Perhaps it is a question you could ask in question time.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Minister, are the Melbourne water corporations your responsibility ultimately?

**Harriet SHING:** Melbourne water –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** They come under this portfolio.

**Harriet SHING:** Metropolitan corporations – you know the *Water Act*, Mr O'Brien. You know how that operates.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, they do, don't they? Chair, this is directly related to this portfolio. I understand where they go; they go back to consolidated revenue. Could someone take on notice for me: how much is being taken out of the Melbourne water authorities in terms of capital repatriation? Ms Vaughan said she does not have that figure now. Could I ask for it to be provided to the committee on notice?

**Harriet SHING:** As I said, Mr O'Brien, I am really happy to see if we can provide something to you, noting that that does actually go back into consolidated revenue, which is within the remit of the Treasurer.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I know where it goes; it is where it comes out. Ms Vaughan just said that it does not impact water rates or infrastructure. But, Minister, economist Stephen Anthony said in the *Age* on 28 January:

On the face of it, it looks to impinge on [a water company's] operating business so is something to be avoided.

He went on to say:

This isn't the sort of decision-making of a steward focused on the operating position of a business, this is something that is going to constrain a business.

There is further commentary there from other experts. Minister, how is this not going to impact either the amount people pay for water or the infrastructure that is serving them?

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you for that question, Mr O'Brien. It is an important opportunity to be able to talk about the way in which pricing occurs. It is a model that is set and established and delivered by the Essential Services Commission. We know that it is really important to make sure that we keep our bills low. This is why here in Melbourne we have the lowest water bills of anywhere in Australia. We have got bills that are \$51 below Sydney, \$113 below Canberra, \$133 below Adelaide, \$926 below Darwin, \$644 below Perth and \$507 below south-east Queensland.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry, this is not relevant to the question at hand, Minister. How does the \$700 million repatriation, as reported in the *Age* on 28 January, not impact either the infrastructure requirements or spending for the authorities or Melbourne ratepayers' water bills?

**Harriet SHING:** So when we look at the way in which dividends are secured by water corporations, there are –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I am not talking about dividends, Minister. For the fifth time, I am talking about capital repatriation, not dividends.

**Harriet SHING:** Dividends are the basis by which water corporations can deliver a range of services and investments within the delivery of their obligations under the Act. I am –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That is not the question.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mr O'Brien. Your time is up. We will go to Mr Hamer for the next 7 minutes.

**Paul HAMER:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials. I would like to talk about the 2022 floods. Minister, as you said, it was a very significant event in terms of both the size and the scale of its impact across the state. I was wondering, particularly given the reviews underway, which you mentioned, how the government is helping impacted communities across the state to better understand what has happened and provide them with some confidence moving forward.

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you very much for that question, Mr Hamer. I did not get to go through the presentation that I had in anywhere near the detail that I wanted. As I have said on a number of occasions here in the Parliament and publicly, these floods really did impact upon so many parts of Victoria. We should not forget, we must not forget and we cannot forget, not just as recovery efforts continue but also as we contemplate future risk, the impact of increasing population growth across flood plains. When you combine that with the fact that we have climatic volatility, we now will see – and we know from today we have got 20 warnings on foot, we have got watch-and-act warnings on foot and we have got a range of concerns and considerations around protection of life and property – that this interoperability is really important, making sure that we have these measures as part of an overarching whole-of-government response framework.

We have initiated payments of between \$300 and \$600 for customers who were either inundated or who were unable to access properties following flooding. There have been a range of business community and support grants. There is \$1.8 billion in flood recovery moneys, which is as a result of partnerships between the state and the Commonwealth, and we are also working alongside local governments. This involves the development of opportunities to deliver flood studies, which are an important part of understanding what future challenges are so that around flood-affected areas we can see changes, for example, to planning approval processes. We are also assisting people in communities to rebuild and to recover, whether that is primary producers, food producers who lost an enormous amount of crop or seed, whether it is small businesses, and the Rochester IGA is one such example – a business at the heart of town that was devastated. Getting in there and providing assistance to enable them to continue operating was as important to the community for symbolic, for psychological, for recovery-related reasons as it was to provide people with a place to get their groceries and to try to find a sense of normality.

Around rural and regional Victoria and in flood-affected areas it has been profound the level of commitment that community members have shown to each other and to their communities. We saw swiftwater rescue events right through to the way in which schools came together to dry out books that had become sodden, neighbourhood houses, lifeguards, people working to make sure that families who were on their roofs were able to be removed, but following that that accommodation could be stood up, and that people could get the mental health support and assistance that they needed. We tried wherever possible to reduce or remove barriers to insurance company engagements and we worked alongside colleagues in the federal government and local government to facilitate much faster engagement for improving and restoring key road, freight and connectivity infrastructure.

There is a lot of work that is yet to be done, however, and when we see that we have a series of climatic challenges, we also now need to be preparing not just for future flooding events and not just for an understanding of the importance of levy management, of the way in which water moves in built-up areas and of early warning systems and interoperability, but also for what drought looks like. We know that 16 out of the last 20 years we have had below-average rainfall, and as far as the future needs of the state, we are going to see a pressure to deliver and to develop opportunities to double our water supply as the population grows. We are looking at about 11.2 million people in Victoria by 2050 – huge challenges; not unique challenges but nonetheless challenges that need to be delivered in partnership with communities.

Finally, social licence is a really, really big part of the work that we are doing. We want to make sure that as people continue to live in and around flood-affected or flood-prone areas they are in a position to have the information that they need, and further to that that newcomers to regions understand the risks of an environment which has been inundated in many cases for many thousands of years and are able to take the action needed to manage and to mitigate against that risk.

**Paul HAMER:** Thanks very much, Minister. You mentioned about Rochester, and obviously that was one of the greatly impacted towns in the floods. If I am correct with my hydrology of Victoria, the Campaspe River flows from Lake Eppalock and then downstream into Rochester, and I was just wondering what work is being done around Lake Eppalock and what work you are doing with the community in relation to that.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes, thank you, Mr Hamer. This is a really important question, particularly given the rainfall events that we are seeing currently. We have current water storages for Eppalock at 89.7 per cent. That is a slight drop on this time last week. But we also know that we have some further forecast falls, and this is where, again, a technical assessment is a big part of the work that we are doing to understand whether there can be operational changes to the way in which Lake Eppalock storages are managed, as well as community engagement. There is a meeting on, I think, the 22nd or the 23rd at Molesworth with community members. GMW will be there. The department is also engaged in that work to make sure that, as we lead up to the completion of that technical review and understanding what our options are, whether they are valves or gates or pipes, that we are in the best position possible to understand how to manage future risk and how to make sure that people downstream have the information that they need as quickly as possible.

**Paul HAMER:** Thank you very much, Minister. If I could also talk briefly just about the –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mr Hamer. Mrs McArthur, you have the next 7 minutes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Minister. Wonderful to see you, I might add.

**Harriet SHING:** It is so lovely to see you, Mrs McArthur. We have the whole afternoon together, I understand.

**Bev McARTHUR:** I know. I could not think of anything better. So, Minister, I am so pleased you mentioned that keeping bills low was a priority. That seems like a great thing. I am wondering if I can ask you about Central Highlands Water's price proposal to the Essential Services Commission for the five-year period 2023 to 2028, which was recently released. The increase for a typical owner-occupier is substantial, but the cost for new development is extraordinary. In growth areas of regional Victoria, it is a crippling proposal. Areas around Ballarat, for example, will see an increase in cost of connections to water and sewerage from the current \$1500 to \$8000 – more than five times the cost, a 500 per cent increase. Minister, do you believe it is acceptable for families hoping to build new homes around Ballarat and across the Central Highlands area that they should face such a massive hike?

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur, for that question. You do raise a really important point that goes directly to the comments I was making in response to Mr Hamer's question – namely, high areas of development across regional Victoria – and the connections charge is one feature of the rapid growth in development that is occurring in other areas as well as within Central Highlands Water's catchment. In addition to that, we have a process whereby existing customers are not bearing the cost of those new connections. We have a range within which those new connections charges are levied against the creation of those accounts, and that is a one-off fee. This is also something which occurs in other parts of the state. This is not unique to Central Highlands Water, but I do perhaps –

**Bev McARTHUR:** No, it is not. Wannon Water, for example.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes, and I do perhaps want to take you to the fact, again, that I mentioned earlier: we have the lowest water bills anywhere in Australia. We also have a range of supports that mean that water corporations are increasing the range of supports they are providing for people in hardship, and we are also making sure that nobody is disconnected.

**Bev McARTHUR:** This is really going to hamper the investment in housing in these areas, with these sorts of increases.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, we need to connect the services, Mrs McArthur, and we want people to have those services –

**Bev McARTHUR:** So a 500 per cent increase, Minister, is acceptable?

**Harriet SHING:** that they need. What we have seen in fact is decreases in water bills across a range of rural and regional areas.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, but the connections are extraordinary.



**Harriet SHING:** I mean, the ESC's report for 2021–22 in fact found that water customers received lower bills in 2021–22 compared to the previous years, and –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, the commission is not happy about these increases. Perhaps Mr Fennessy could comment.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, Ms Brown, you might wish to add something if you would like to this. You have got some time.

**Deb BROWN:** Absolutely, Minister. So just to clarify, new customer contributions for Central Highlands Water, as submitted to the ESC as part of those pricing determinations, propose an increase for new water services provisions in line with many other parts of the state to ensure that they have full cost recovery for the access provided by those new services. We know places like Ballarat are experiencing significant development – 32,000 lots alone – and that requires significant investment in new services for water corporations. And they have also for the first time introduced a water sewerage charge, which to date they have not passed on to new customers and the broader customer base has had to cover it. And so those changes, in line with that ESC determination, have been put forward to the ESC through that process.

**Harriet SHING:** They are the lowest bills in Australia.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So at the same time – perhaps you could comment – they are going to increase their revenue in this area by \$4.5 million. They have employed two new employees for the five-year period at \$900,000 a year – for two employees. Is that acceptable?

**Harriet SHING:** I do not think that is correct, is it?

**Deb BROWN:** I can clarify, Minister. That is –

**Bev McARTHUR:** \$450,000 each.

**Deb BROWN:** Unfortunately, that is not a correct statement. The price determination talks about two new staff each year, going up to 10 new staff by the end of that pricing period. So it is not two new staff at that price, it is a collective value. Those staff are factored in at the average arrangement for an FTE. I understand the ESC asked Central Highlands Water to consider that, and Central Highlands has accepted the findings of the ESC and will not pass on that particular cost of additional FTE to deal with their services.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Minister, has the managing director of Melbourne Water Nerina Di Lorenzo got your full confidence?

**Harriet SHING:** What I think you are trying to do, Mrs McArthur, is to get me to make comment on matters which Melbourne Water is currently addressing as part of its review post the flooding.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Has she done a good job, Minister?

**Harriet SHING:** I think Melbourne Water is doing a fantastic job.

**Bev McARTHUR:** No, no –

**Harriet SHING:** I think the leadership at Melbourne Water is doing –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Ms Di Lorenzo – has she done a good job.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you. On Monday of this week Melbourne Water announced part of their weather monitoring work would be handed over to the Bureau of Meteorology. Since they are handing over these functions, will consumers be paying less for their water charges?

**Harriet SHING:** Again you have conflated a couple of issues here, so I might just take this opportunity perhaps to give you some context.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Just tell us about the Bureau of Meteorology.

**Harriet SHING:** We have funding provided to the SES and to the Bureau of Meteorology to assist with warning systems. Melbourne Water also has a role in the way in which it receives and dispenses with information, and that work will continue. The announcement that I think that you are referring to goes to the way in which the Bureau of Meteorology will take carriage of the dispatch of that information as part of warning systems, and that will be part of continuous improvement that is occurring across the board.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So will it save money for the water users of Melbourne? Will it reduce their fees?

**Harriet SHING:** As I said, there is a partnership that already operates between the Bureau of Meteorology, the SES, DEECA, a range of other agencies, local government and Melbourne Water, and this is where, again, that work will continue as part of continuous improvement in flood preparedness.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Good. Minister, I move to budget paper 3, page 10, ‘additional flood support’ –

**Harriet SHING:** Hold on.

**Bev McARTHUR:** and budget paper 3, page 163, ‘Placed-based plans and actions underway for healthier communities and environments.’ Minister, in June 2020 the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority undertook major works to the lower Barwon River weir – replaced the old weir, removed floodgates and substituted them with a solid wall. Swamp conditions have replaced seasonal variations along the Barwon River, and paddocks formerly used for livestock –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms McArthur. You are out of time.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Saved by the bell, Minister.

**Harriet SHING:** We were just getting our rhythm.

**The CHAIR:** We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials. I want to ask about the Murray–Darling Basin plan, and I draw your attention to budget paper 5, page 88, which sets out the government’s contribution to that. Can you please outline Victoria’s progress in meeting our basin plan obligations.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes. Thank you. I am really glad that we have an opportunity to talk about the Murray Basin plan. This is a plan which Victoria has signed up to with a range of other jurisdictions. We are committed to delivering on the Murray–Darling Basin plan in a way that balances a range of interests – environmental, social, economic – and community-based impacts for our rivers and for our waterways. We have made really significant progress in delivering the basin plan and our obligations. We have already delivered 77 per cent of our water recovery target, so that is 826 gig out of 1075 gegalitres. Sorry, I should stop abbreviating words; it happens a lot in this portfolio. And 86 per cent of our sustainable –

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Sorry, Minister. What was that figure?

**Harriet SHING:** 826 gig out of 1075 gig. And what I have indicated to the Commonwealth as part of the ministerial council process and in discussions with my Commonwealth and other jurisdictional counterparts is that with an additional two years, an extension to 30 June 2026, we will be in a position to deliver on 86 per cent of our works, making sure that we have got a range of measures that ensure we are the largest contributor to environmental water in support of additional returns that do not lead to negative consequences for communities. So we are continuing the work to get on with the job of delivering the plan. It is hard work, though. Sorry, it is 95 and 98 per cent. I beg your pardon; it is not 86 per cent. Just to clarify, we will achieve 95 per cent of our commitments and 98 per cent with constraints if we are given that additional two-year period.

What I want to make clear, though, is that Victoria has for a really long time worked very, very hard to deliver on its commitments under the plan. We have made better progress than any other jurisdiction towards achievement of the objectives of the plan. We are seeing, through arrangements such as the flood plain watering

projects, more than 14,000 hectares that will benefit because we are introducing water in ways that mimic natural flows. We use pumps, we use regulators, and in doing so we can actually take water that would not otherwise get over the banks unless we are talking about enormous, large-scale, very rare flooding events like the ones we saw last October. We can bring it into the landscape, and we are talking about landscapes that have needed this very gentle flow of water over them for thousands of years. We are talking about parts of the state where we have the largest traditional owner burial sites and where we have an extraordinary variety of flora and fauna, we have migratory birds and we have a range of really important signifiers of the health of ecosystems. These are the sorts of things that we have been able to achieve through a lot of hard work and a lot of commitment. More than 600,000 hours have gone into delivering these additional projects, and I am keen to see that where we can achieve more time and where we can get agreement from the Commonwealth to do that, we can deliver on 98 per cent of our obligations under the plan and we can also make sure that our food producers and our communities along the Murray are in a position to also make those changes and adjustments to a variable climate and that volatility without having those negative socio-economic impacts.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. You have spoken about Victoria seeking more time to complete the sustainable diversion limit adjustment –

**Harriet SHING:** We call it SDLAM. You can call it anything you like.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** It does not flow like water, the name, does it?

**Harriet SHING:** No.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** What are the impacts of projects like the Victorian flood plain restoration not being completed?

**Harriet SHING:** These projects are incredibly important to make sure that we are safeguarding the future health of our flood plains. Flood plains are an incredibly abundant and important part of our landscapes. I would encourage anybody who has not visited them to go out and to get onto country. There is so much to discover if you know where and how to look. This is a part of the world that without these flows – this regular, as I said, gentle flow of water over the landscape that is allowed to sit there before it recedes – we will see that river red gum, black box, these tiny little native orchids, the flora and the fauna that need these watering events to thrive and to survive will not be able to stay healthy, and we will lose vast tracts of environmental waterways, catchments and the treasures that exist in this part of the state. We have a number of projects that are able to be delivered to ensure that 14,000 hectares, as I said, of flood plain can be managed and managed well. This is being managed for all Victorians. It is being managed for environmental interests not just here in Victoria but across the entire southern basin. We know that where this work is able to be demonstrated as being effective – which it is, because the technology is not new; it is pumps, it is regulators, it is inconspicuous infrastructure in the landscape where we have those partnerships with traditional owners – results are extraordinary, they are enduring, and it is so important to be able to complete them. I really look forward to having the Commonwealth's engagement, as we have had to date, and to those negotiations continuing to be able to secure the future of these really important projects for the interests of not just us but future generations.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. I live in an ephemeral wetland sort of area, and we do have a bus stop which is known to have the best wildflowers behind it at the right time of year.

**Harriet SHING:** That is a big call.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** It is a great place to live. I just wanted to ask you: on budget paper 3, page 163 –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Kathage, your time is up. We are going to go back to Mr O'Brien for the next 7 minutes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, an email released under FOI from December shows correspondence between 'minstaff' and the office of the Premier. I believe it is either from you or your office. Did you or your office convey the details of Melbourne Water's flood review to the office of the Premier?

**Harriet SHING:** No.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Was your office involved in briefing the Premier's office on the Melbourne Water flood review?

**Harriet SHING:** On 6 December when the flood –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, 15 December.

**Harriet SHING:** Sorry, 15 December. So as I understand, the terms of reference had been established, Mr Wimbush had been appointed and the work in relation to the review was underway. This is therefore part of what I am regularly updated on within the remit of the water portfolio –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well –

**Harriet SHING:** I will just answer the question if I can – and as part of the work that I do across all of my portfolios there is exchange of information with other ministerial offices and with the Premier's office.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, this email was marked 'Official. Sensitive. For approval – Melbourne Water Maribyrnong flood reviews,' and it is about a media release or media strategy, and it says:

Can you call me? No issues I've just asked –  
blank –

... flag it with PPO before it goes.

So what was sensitive about a Melbourne Water – an independent authority – media release that needed to be run past the PPO, and is that a standard practice in the government?

**Harriet SHING:** Isn't that a separate question to the one that you were asking?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, the first question was: who was it? They have blanked it out so I cannot tell you.

**Harriet SHING:** I do not know.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Well, it is clearly someone in your office because it was 'minstaff', and it would not –

**Harriet SHING:** Well, I think across government there is a 'minstaff' suffix, isn't there?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Which other portfolio minister might have been dealing with Melbourne Water?

**Harriet SHING:** I do not know.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Are you going to ask me to believe that it might have been someone else not in the Premier's office, not in your office?

**Harriet SHING:** No, no. What I am going to say to you, Mr O'Brien, is that as part of the portfolio and all portfolios, I talk with colleagues about the work that is being done. For me not to do that would be –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, this is not about talking. This is about approval. This is asking for approval for the Melbourne Water media strategy for announcing the Maribyrnong flood review.

**Harriet SHING:** The process of engagement is that I talk with colleagues. My office speaks with colleagues. The work of Melbourne Water's independent review is independent, and that work of the review is a matter for it. However –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well then –

**Harriet SHING:** No, no, I just want to clarify this, because I receive briefings, updates and information from a range of different places, including within the department. The department works closely with agencies and with statutory entities such as Melbourne Water, and in the course of Melbourne Water's review following the floods and its independent review that continues at this point in time, it is important that I am up to speed on what is happening.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** There is something about talking to your colleagues and there is something about being up to speed. This is 'Sensitive. For approval'. This was Melbourne Water having to come through your office and the Premier's office to tick off what they wanted to do.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes, I am not sure I would accept that, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Is that what happened?

**Harriet SHING:** I would not accept that. The information that I received, the information and the detail and the updates that I received on Melbourne Water's work about the review that it is undertaking, is what I saw when it was public.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Did you approve it – what Melbourne Water was doing?

**Harriet SHING:** As I said, what I saw was what was released.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But that is not the question. The question was: did you approve it or were you just advised of it?

**Harriet SHING:** I can only say to you, Mr O'Brien, the information that I saw was the information that was released.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Both Secretary Bradley and Ms Vaughan, you were copied in on a similar email chain about the release of the flood review strategy. Is it common practice for an independent authority like Melbourne Water to be running this sort of stuff past the department?

**John BRADLEY:** It is certainly common for portfolio entities to share information with the department. We work very closely with portfolio entities on their activities, and that means that they are quite frequently making us aware of significant developments, whether that is an operational activity or whether it is public communication.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Again, Secretary, the question here is not about information being provided. This was a series of emails headed 'For approval'. Is it the case that the department ticks off on what the supposedly independent Melbourne Water is doing?

**John BRADLEY:** I would not describe that as common, no.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It is not common. So it was unusual for Melbourne Water to seek approval for this announcement?

**John BRADLEY:** No, I am just saying that I would not characterise that as necessarily seeking approval from the department in the way that it was provided.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Even when the subject matter of the head of the email is 'For approval'.

**John BRADLEY:** Yes. I am not aware of the details of the email that you are referring to. I am just saying that in relation to that issue, the department did not see its role as approving the content of the media release.

**Harriet SHING:** Mr O'Brien, I might just perhaps provide you with some clarity here. Melbourne Water's review of what occurred within the terms of reference of its independent review is independent.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But we have got emails saying that it was sent to the Premier's office for approval.

**Harriet SHING:** No matter what kind of narrative you are seeking to run here, the terms of reference were established by Melbourne Water. The appointment of Mr Wimbush, the probity advice, the decisions taken between Melbourne Water and Mr Wimbush to change the terms of that engagement, the appointment of Mr Pagone the former Supreme Court judge to continue the work of that review – these are all matters for Melbourne Water.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Except that there is an email showing that they asked the Premier's office for approval.

**Harriet SHING:** These are all decisions that have been taken by Melbourne Water in accordance with its obligations and responsibilities and the terms that it has set for its own review of what occurred last October.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes. Well, I will move on, Minister. But when an email is sent to the Premier's office that says 'For approval', I think it is a different thing.

**Harriet SHING:** I do not think it is reasonable to conclude that. Does the suffix '@opposition.vic.gov.au' mean that it went to your electorate office, Mr O'Brien?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It was sent to the Premier's office: PPO. Anyway, just quickly, in the time I have got left: the latest ministerial council on the Murray–Darling Basin plan was held on 24 February. It had a communiqué where the minister has:

... noted that the Commonwealth reiterated its determination to deliver the 450GL per year of additional environmental water ...

Did you oppose this specific point during that meeting, and did you have a separate conversation or a direct conversation with the federal minister opposing buybacks?

**Harriet SHING:** I have been very clear, Mr O'Brien, on my position about buybacks: that in fact they do not take place in a way that contains and incorporates neutral or positive socio-economic outcomes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** In a way or at all? Have you opposed them with the federal minister at all?

**Harriet SHING:** I have been very clear about our opposition to buybacks. I have done that publicly and in a range of other ways.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, your time has expired. We will go onto Mr Galea for the next 7 minutes.

**Michael GALEA:** Thanks, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. Good afternoon, officials.

**Harriet SHING:** Hello.

**Michael GALEA:** Hello. Minister, I would like to start by talking about the *Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy* and refer –

**Harriet SHING:** Wait, wait, wait. Do you mean this document?

**Michael GALEA:** Oh, you have got it.

**Harriet SHING:** Fantastic. I am looking forward –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Oh, you just happen to have a copy of it?

**Harriet SHING:** No, no, I am very proud of this document. I am very proud of this document.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It is almost like the member was given advance warning.

**Harriet SHING:** This is years of work. It is almost as though, Mr O'Brien, you also want to talk about this, as you just said. I cannot wait.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I would love to, actually. I am going to jump in, Michael, if that is okay.

**Michael GALEA:** Very good, absolutely.

**Harriet SHING:** And I did not give you the heads up.

**Bev McArthur** interjected.

**Harriet SHING:** Mrs McArthur, come on down. You can ask about it as well. Everyone has got an opportunity to talk.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** When do you start building the second desal plan? That is my first question.

**Harriet SHING:** Now, let us talk about that, Mr O'Brien. I am sure that you will have a few things to say about that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** All right. I have been invited, Chair.

**Michael GALEA:** I could also ask you –

**Harriet SHING:** Sorry, Mr Galea, we have corrupted the process somewhat, and I did not intend for that to happen.

**Michael GALEA:** No, it is a very exciting topic.

**Danny O'Brien** interjected.

**Harriet SHING:** 'Cede your time' – this is terrible so early in the week.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you for the offer, Mr O'Brien. I would love to ask you about the Monterey recycled water scheme that you and I both attended a couple months ago in Frankston North, which was fantastic too.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** But if I can perhaps start by asking in broad terms –

**Bev McARTHUR:** What did you go to, Mr Galea?

**Michael GALEA:** The Monterey reserve package, as part of this scheme, which is a fantastic initiative that the minister has been leading.

**Harriet SHING:** The greenest sporting grounds you could possibly imagine, Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** That is so good.

**Michael GALEA:** It is. It is brilliant.

**Harriet SHING:** Like velvet, they are.

**Michael GALEA:** Minister, in broad terms, could you please discuss how the implementation of the \$1.2 million package, as part of table 1.9 in budget paper 3 – the *Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy* – is going?

**Danny O'Brien** interjected.

**Harriet SHING:** Why do you hate announcements about metropolitan water initiatives, Mr O'Brien? Thank you so much for that question, Mr Galea. We are in a position to talk about the better use of water, and this includes the way that we deal with our rainwater – our stormwater – the way that we collect and gather water and process that for a range of different uses. Sustainability and security of supply is important in a range of different ways, as I have said. As I indicated in a couple of answers earlier, a growing population means we also have to turn our minds to being better at managing this finite resource. When we manage water, we are also in a position to deliver enhanced livability, and the outcomes that you have spoken to in your opening remarks are part of an overall investment around the sustainable water strategy that was released in September last year.

My predecessor Minister Neville did an enormous amount of work to bring people together over several years. This is a 50-year plan. In 2022–23 we saw that there was \$56.6 million invested to bring this work together and take it from plans, proposals and priorities into actions on the ground. We have also got here a range of additional incentives and investments in the budget – \$1.2 million – but we have the work underway this year. There is \$10 million for waterway and catchment health projects in urban and regional Victoria, and that includes improving the water supply to – and Mr O'Brien, I am going to make you happy here – the lower Latrobe wetlands and the importance of that work coming within the sustainability framework as well; a

fishway at Maffra Weir; the work that we are doing to investigate improvements for the health of the Moorabool River; and upgrading the Werribee diversion.

We have also got investments in manufactured water and what we can do for recycled, desalination and stormwater projects. These are the sorts of things that are within the overarching jigsaw of making our water use more efficient and of preventing and stopping loss, whether that is through evaporation, through leaks or through a range of other systems where delivery is not as efficient as it could be, and understanding how we meet the challenges of future growth. Without desalination water, for example – and I suspect will come to this shortly – we would have about 20 per cent less water in the system than we have now. So we have to be better. We have to be smarter.

**Bev McARTHUR:** You should open up a dam, Minister.

**Harriet SHING:** Do you want to talk about dams, Mrs McArthur? I am really looking forward to it.

**Bev McARTHUR:** A dam in the Otways, Minister.

**Harriet SHING:** That is a shot out of left field. I would not have thought you would have a position on dams, but there you go.

**Bev McARTHUR:** I love dams.

**Harriet SHING:** I know you do, Mrs McArthur. The impact of climate change is also important here. So this is about augmenting what we have to meet urban water needs. It is about a range of things, from greening our sports fields to the pipeline and the green pipeline work, the Dingley recycled work and the approaches that we have taken to resurfacing our creeks and waterways. We know that in parts of the state that are growing rapidly livability is dramatically enhanced when people have access to waterways – when they can walk to, spend time near or engage with their waterways – and Mr Hilakari, it was wonderful to join you recently to experience this directly. We see citizen science. We see people getting engaged with plantings and with removal of pest and invasive species. We see the opportunity to develop walkways and viewing platforms and accessibility areas, and this in fact is the sort of thing that improves wellbeing whilst also improving the health of our riparian environments but our communities as well. We know that we want places for people to recreate, for people to spend time in, and we also want to see that we are managing our built-up areas in a way that helps us to better understand heat reduction and the heat island effect, Chair, that you are also very familiar with in your electorate. Planting trees, ensuring we have sustainable water supply, making sure that we have recreational spaces and making sure that we are enhancing the use that we are already making of a range of different water resources are a big part of the work we are doing through the sustainable water strategy, and that is why we need a 50-year plan. That is why we have a 50-year plan, because ultimately this work continues well beyond our time here in this room, well beyond our work in this Parliament, and it is about intergenerational investment in natural resource management and integrated water management.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. In the brief time I have left, could you outline some of the future augmentation projects that are being considered and why.

**Harriet SHING:** So when we talk about augmentation it is about resilience and it is about meeting urban water needs, investigating the Melbourne–Geelong pipeline changes, better sharing the benefits of the desalination plant across the region and the work that we do with the necessary level of community engagement and social licence. We need to bring people along with us, and that is precisely what this particular strategy is intended to do and what it is already doing.

**Michael GALEA:** Fantastic. Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Galea. Your time is up. We will go to Ms Sandell.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Thank you, Chair.

**Harriet SHING:** Hello.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Good afternoon, Minister. I also would like to ask about the Murray–Darling Basin plan.



**Harriet SHING:** Yes, of course.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Probably no surprise. My understanding is there is no new funding allocated in this budget for the return of real water to the environment. I want to ask about the SDLAMs. My understanding is that the four largest floodplain restoration projects that were going to deliver around 60 gigs of environmental water have been halted. So how does the government plan to make up that remaining 60 gigs of water to be returned to the environment if those SDLAMs have been halted and buybacks are still off the table?

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you, Ms Sandell. What I would perhaps like to do to respond to the way that you have phrased the question and those projects is say what I would really like to see is, and I am hopeful that we can negotiate with the Commonwealth to achieve, delivery of all of those projects, that we will see –

**Ellen SANDELL:** Two years later – is that what you are saying?

**Harriet SHING:** Yes. As the ministerial council communiqué reflects, at the last gathering of ministers from various states, territories and the Commonwealth we did actually see a very clear expression of a request for an extension of time from Victoria and also from New South Wales. We have, for context, submitted all of our water plans on time. We have done the work that we need to do to deliver 95 per cent of our commitments under the plan. We have achieved more by way of return of environmental water than any other jurisdiction, and with constraints we can achieve, by 30 June 2026, 98 per cent of our obligations and commitments.

**Ellen SANDELL:** I appreciate that. I guess the question is: we have seen reports that we are very much likely to go into an El Niño period.

**Harriet SHING:** El Niño, yes. Sorry, it is just a bit hard to hear.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Can our environment wait for that water?

**Harriet SHING:** You are right about El Niño. It is not immune in an El Niño situation to have the large falls that we have seen in the last 24 hours of 100 mil to 150 mil –

**Ellen SANDELL:** Are we just hoping that it will rain? That does not seem like a great strategy.

**Harriet SHING:** No, but what we can do is make the best use of water in a range of different ways that are efficient, that are based in science and that actually achieve protection and preservation of biodiversity. And we do have a range of investments that are about delivering on these projects. When we have an additional two years we are also accommodating the floods and the pandemic that, despite the Murray Basin plan and the authority not recognising, were significant intervening factors in the way in which these works could be delivered. So we have water that is reserved for the environment. I note that the Take report that was issued federally indicated that between 2021 and 2022 there was approximately 8675 gigalitres available for environmental take and 6800-odd gig was taken from that. Environmental water is being taken at a lesser rate based on that report than is available to it. We also know that there has been an order placed for environmental water as well. There is a lot being done. As I said, we have returned more environmental water in Victoria than any other state or territory as part of the plan.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Can I ask about those flood plain restoration projects. What has been the assessment process for choosing, it seems like, somewhat of an arbitrary number of wetlands to water through the SDLAM.

**Harriet SHING:** It is not arbitrary at all. What we have done is a range of things to understand where and how we can have the most impact in a range of different environments. When we think about these flood plains and we think about Wallpolla and Lindsay and the work that we would like to be able to continue there, you can see across Gunbower, across Hattah and a range of other projects the before, during and after of what happens with these environmental watering events. But we also have a range of other natural environments – as you would be aware, the Narrows and the Barmah forest. That is 66,000 hectares of extraordinary forest that is shared along the border of New South Wales and Victoria. We have been very careful in the way that we regulate the flows and the trades both up and downstream of the Narrows.

What happens in a situation of flooding is that water goes out into the forest and it waters again that forest environment gently and carefully. We know that if there is too much water that goes through the Narrows, however, that can lead to fish deaths and that can actually have a negative impact, so it is a balance –

**Ellen SANDELL:** I have many more questions, Minister –

**Harriet SHING:** Sorry. No, you go ahead.

**Ellen SANDELL:** but I think only 5 seconds left, so I might leave it there.

**Harriet SHING:** As you may appreciate, I have got a lot to say on this topic.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Sandell, you still have 2 minutes.

**Harriet SHING:** You have got 2 minutes.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Do I have 2 more minutes? Great. Excellent. I have got more questions. I thought I only had 5 minutes. It is my understanding that this is the pot of funds from the Commonwealth to relocate low-lying infrastructure to enable relaxation of constraints along the Murray–Darling Basin. My understanding is the Victorian government agreed to this in 2013 but is still in the feasibility stage of enacting it. As part of the flood recovery effort, given that we have got this opportunity I guess to rebuild infrastructure, will the government utilise this effort to enact constraints relaxation principles along the Murray–Darling Basin?

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you. Again, this is a really complex area. Should anybody on the committee or indeed listening to this wish to engage on the complexity of these matters and the constraints projects, do let us keep talking about it, because, as everyone I hope will appreciate, a healthy river really does depend on connectivity to the flood plain. In 2019 basin water ministers agreed to a community co-design approach, and in line with this direction a consultative committee that was chaired by Pat McNamara included riparian landholders, traditional owners, community members, government representatives and other key stakeholders. It is overseeing a feasibility study to assess the potential benefits in the context of managing risks and report on how best to engage with the broader community. As I indicated earlier, though, with constraint projects, we can achieve 98 per cent of our obligations and commitments under the plan by 30 June 2026. Due to the flooding in October last year, the consultative committee meetings were paused, but they have since recommenced, and it is on track for completion by October this year. The project will be implemented and operational by 30 June next year, and any constraints program will need to be complemented with a works program, such as the flood plain restoration project, to enable those watering events of environmental sites.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Hilakari for the last session.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister.

**Harriet SHING:** Oh, sorry.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** No, that is okay. And thank you, officials, for the time that you have given us this afternoon. Minister, I am going to take you to ‘Protecting waterways so our wildlife can thrive.’ I will take you to Waterways of the West, something close to both of our hearts, in a moment, but first I might take you there. It is on budget paper 3, page 28. Can you please outline some of the work that the government is doing currently in this space?

**Harriet SHING:** Thanks, Mr Hilakari. Waterways of the West is actually a really important part of a suite of projects that we are delivering. The way in which our waterways respond to stress, either occasioned by too much or not enough water, is part of what is driving that work to manage the impact on waterways and their health and the conditions as they might change over time. So in this budget, as you would see, there is a \$10 million investment over four years for the Green Links fund, and this is about revegetating and rehabilitating areas of our urban waterways. Again, the urban waterways that I talked about earlier are the ones that connect communities – that drive enhanced livability, pride of place and community connection – and, as you know, Mr Hilakari, provide opportunities for people to come together. We heard from people from an enormous range of multicultural communities who are proud of and connected to their waterways in the most wonderful and positive and enduring ways.

This is also about native wildlife. It is about seeing that we have everything from microcosms through to the platypus that we were lucky to see. To improve the amenity of our waterways also leaves enhanced environmental benefits.

We have also got \$17.1 million to continue to improve the way we manage the Yarra River, Birrarung, the Barwon – the Parwan – and Moorabool rivers, the Maribymong and Werribee rivers and other urban waterways and their lands across the west of Melbourne. In this financial budgetary period, the funding will support the continued implementation of *Burndap Birrarung Burndap Umarkoo*, which is the *Yarra Strategic Plan*. This is, again, to touch on the importance of traditional owner connection to our waterways. The status of the Yarra as a living entity is profoundly important. It recognises that connection that is part of the story of the oldest continuous culture on earth. It also recognises a nation-leading conversation. Here in Victoria, across a range of different decision-making environments, policy directions and priorities, self-determination, respect and the truth-telling and story-sharing process are germane to much of what we do in this government.

The *Water is Life* framework is something that I would commend to you. It is a nation-leading road map for traditional owner access to water, and we also want to make sure that traditional owner values and engagement are a part of delivering on actions for these waterways. We are also investing \$248 million over four years to improve connections – to improve connectivity – and catchment health across regional Victoria.

So there is a lot to unpack in what I have just said, but the work is careful, it is done in conjunction and partnership with communities, it is about making sure that when we roll out the Green Links fund in the coming years we consider how best we can deploy to meet the needs of urban waterways. And we anticipate that the Green Links fund itself can deliver up to 200 hectares of re-veg works to improve habitat and water quality as well as providing those cool green spaces that I have talked about.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** That Green Links fund – and thank you for giving some sense of just the size of the area that will be covered off by the Green Links fund – it primarily focuses on urban waterways. What are the programs that are benefiting and rehabilitating our regional waterways as well? As you know, Werribee River is one of the drier catchments across our state, but if we take us out of that metro area and go into some of those regional areas, I would be interested in that.

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you. So there is \$248 million in regional waterways and catchment health, again which is really important as we respond to a number of challenges but also make the most of the number of opportunities. That is funding for 19 of our flagship waterway programs as well as making sure we are partnering between traditional owner groups, catchment management authorities, water corporations and traditional owners, as I said.

On-ground works at priority sites across regional Victoria include the Agnes River in south-west Gippsland, the Wimmera, Merbein Common in Mildura, Budj Bim in the Glenelg Hopkins region and the Goulburn, and these might well include projects such as fencing. We have low-cost initiatives that make a really important difference to the health of our waterways. You can see, for example, where you stop grazing stock down to a water line the health of the riverbanks or waterway banks improves dramatically, and then you see a halo of environmental benefit that also yields economic benefit, Mrs McArthur, that you would be very pleased to hear about.

**Bev McARTHUR:** It would probably get campers off farmland as well.

**Harriet SHING:** Sorry?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Get the campers off the river frontages – that might help.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, that is a different portfolio, Mrs McArthur –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes, because no-one wants that one, do they? That is a hot potato no-one wants.

**Harriet SHING:** but you know that I am always amenable to a discussion. But it is also about new catchment management strategies, it is about community-based citizen science programs and, again, to see what this does in action where you have wetland projects and enhancement projects. Being in Bairnsdale in the last couple of years to see the way in which these plantings have occurred with school groups, with scouts, with

citizen scientists, with people from a range of different clubs and organisations is not dissimilar to what you see in Mildura, it is not dissimilar to what you see in other rural and regional settings, where the commitment of communities – whether it is the Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee, whether it is the work on the coastal parks, whether it is Gunaikurnai Land and Waters engagement with that management plan and framework – and the results speak to collaboration and partnerships and a commitment to delivering improvements across a range of different considerations and stakeholder groups. These are enduring outcomes. They are outcomes that deserve our support, and again it is really great to see that there is that investment in regional Victoria. It is a \$5 billion investment, and Mr O'Brien and Mrs McArthur, we will come to that in a subsequent hearing. But this is work on the ground that is making a difference.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you, Minister and department officials, for appearing before the committee today.

The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is now going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the equality portfolio.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**