

Inquiry into the Management, Governance and Use of Environmental Water

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission the Victorian Governments inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water.

I will respond to each of the 4 points raised in the terms of reference and also make some general comments.

1. the assessment of the role of environmental water management in preventing or causing 'blackwater' events;

Environmental water management in Victoria is difficult given the restrictions and conditions imposed on water managers.

I am presuming here that environmental water managers are, given their title, required to manage environmental water in such a way that Victoria's environmental assets are protected and where possible, enhanced.

Unquestionably the best environmental gains to be had from environmental water are in an overbank flood. The government has made it very clear that using environmental water to achieve or contribute to an overbank flood is not permitted, not because it wouldn't achieve the desired outcomes but because of the legal implications. This simple fact alone means we are never going to be able to get the best possible gains from the use of environmental water.

Environmental water managers must therefore manage things strategically to achieve the best outcomes possible. This will mean utilising available waterway flows to assist in getting environmental water into some areas of the floodplain. This could sometimes result in unwanted outcomes, as in the case of blackwater.

The committee responsible for this current inquiry know full well that blackwater is a complex issue, with how long since the last inundation being perhaps the main driver of large blackwater events. By not allowing or preventing overbank flooding the government is actually contributing to the ongoing problem of blackwater.

Generally speaking, the initial cause of mobilisation of oxygen poor water will be a natural event that pushes water over bank. On occasions, environmental water may contribute to higher flows that mobilise blackwater, but given the inability to push large quantities of environmental water down our waterways this is not ever going to be the major cause of blackwater events.

Indeed, periodic lower bench inundation with environmental water would help mitigate blackwater events during high waterway flows.

An important component of ecologically healthy waterways is carbon. Whilst blackwater is an undesirable outcome on the floodplain the mobilisation and movement of carbon is vital for the ongoing ecological health of our waterways and wetlands. Engineering solutions run the risk of failing to support this vital carbon movement. With natural flows being reduced to the extent they

have, environmental water can play a vital role in supporting this process, but only if any engineering works are done with multiple outcomes in mind.

2. How environmental water and environmental water managers interact with, and utilise, management tools such as carryover and whether the carryover of environmental water impacts on the availability of water for irrigators;

I do not understand why this point is in here but feel compelled to state the obvious.

Environmental water holders have a responsibility to manage environmental water. And they don't have much of it to utilise. This means that in some years there will be environmental water that is not used and will need to be carried over. And this means that there is a chance that accumulated environmental water will impact upon other users water; the same as if any water holder or holders decided to carry over water.

Duh!

The committee will be aware that during some previous dry years when environmental water was not used it was the irrigators that benefitted from having extra water available for use. An added issue is the extra water being held in storages contributes to improved amenity and water available for use in places like Eildon.

The main thing that needs to be pointed out here is that environmental water is all about maintaining, and where possible improving the condition and quality of Victoria's waterways and wetlands. Healthy waterways generate good quality water for irrigation, urban consumption and natural amenity and condition, all things that underpin productive farming and living in areas where irrigators operate.

Another important issue in regard to environmental water is timing of use. Environmental water is often used early in spring, a time when seasonal allocations are still being determined. The ability to carry over water is important for this to occur. This early use, often before the traditional high inflow months has the added benefit of freeing up storage capacity for irrigators.

3. consideration of what barriers exist to the more efficient use of environmental water and how these may be addressed;

Levee banks pose a problem for environmental water managers. They prevent lower bench and anabranch inundation that would contribute significantly to waterway health. Where possible and practicable these levee banks should be removed or modified.

Access to wetlands is a significant issue. In areas like the floodplains of northern Victoria there are many wetlands that cannot be accessed with environmental water. Some work has been done to access important wetlands but this is an area that could be improved by utilising existing water authorities to carry out further works.

Pockets of resilience- local use of environmental water

This is an area that has the potential to achieve one of the best outcomes for environmental water use. Much of the work being done to generate the water savings that contribute to environmental water is being done at a local scale; renewing and decommissioning old leaking channels. This is having both a positive and a negative effect. The positive being the generation of environmental water and the negative being the devastation of local resilience.

Central Goulburn number 2 channel is a very good example of the latter. This channel has been leaking since the rural water corporation became Goulburn Murray Water in the early 1990's. Recent renewal of sections of this channel generated significant water savings, but it took out some mini wetlands that had supported several families of Rakali, thousands of frogs and numerous wetland bird species. The Rakali were all killed, the frogs had a similar experience and the wetland birds have had to move.

Overall it's a no brainer; the regional resilience of wetland reliant species was negatively impacted. Over time the strategic use of environmental water may help to address this but in the short to medium term it is an overall loss.

Management of the regions aquatic and wetland dependant fauna and flora should be done in a holistic way. If it was there would be recognition of the loss of hundreds of resilience hotspots that are being taken out and a program put in place to support landowners that are happy to contribute to, and maintain some of these places. Imagine the improved resilience if a couple of hundred landowners were receiving small amounts of local environmental water to maintain mini wetlands as part of their on farm water management practices.

4. Assessment of fees and charges applied to environmental water and whether these differ from those imposed on other water users.

Once again I am not sure why this point is up for discussion unless someone is trying to politicise environmental management.

It is very clear that we all benefit immensely from a healthy natural environment. And conversely, our businesses and communities would be unviable if our waterways were to become degraded to a point where water quality and amenity were compromised.

If this point is to be discussed holistically then we need to be thinking about and talking about the opposite side of the coin; how much we should **pay** 'the' environment for our clean air and clean water. Do the math about the cost of cleaning the air that we breathe and work out how much it would cost to get saline, brackish water up to drinking and irrigating standards. It is a no brainer.

Works undertaken to protect, maintain and enhance natural ecological processes and dependant species should be happening as a matter of course. The state of the environment reports highlight that we are still failing to address the decline in our natural assets. This can partly be attributed to the siloed nature of government departments and authorities. Water management is a glaring example of this. It should be improved.

It appears at times as if the structures in place to manage Victoria's water (and associated aquatic ecosystems) are not working together.

Water authorities (rural and urban), DELWP, CMA's and the environmental water holders office are all part of the Victorian government but it is clear they are not all involved in achieving the best outcomes when managing the states assets they are individually responsible for.

Education and awareness of the issues involved in managing Victoria's aquatic assets also needs to improve. Much of the angst and uncertainty in rural communities could be allayed with better support programs and more investment in improving peoples understanding of the issues.

One of the ways this is currently working well is in the Goulburn broken catchment where the Wetland Working Group brings community members from a range of organisations together with agency and department staff. This structure enables groups to interact with the decision makers in a robust forum to discuss options and best outcomes when using environmental water.

Another area of concern in regard to the management, governance and use of environmental water is the interaction between community engagement and strategy development. If some of the aforementioned education and awareness raising processes are not improved we run the risk of using ignorant and ill-informed community attitudes to drive policy and strategic development.

The current heated debate about what needs to happen to 'fix' the Murray Darling Basin is a glaring example of failed leadership and a willingness to allow self-interest to drive policy and decision making.

Our political leaders need to be just that; leaders. We have some very significant environmental challenges in front of us and they must be addressed. Any associated social and economic issues must also be addressed, but they must be addressed in the context of the need to fix the underlying ecological issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to make comment

Kind regards

John Laing