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The Executive Officer,
Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee,
Parliament House, Spring Street,
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

To whom it may concern,

Re: Inquiry into the Management, Governance and Use of Environmental Water

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the Management, Governance and Use of Environmental Water*.

1. Our role and interest relevant to this inquiry

West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (WGCMA) is responsible for the use of environmental water in the Latrobe, Thomson and Macalister rivers, and the lower Latrobe River wetlands (part of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar Site). We carry out this duty in partnership with:

- *Victorian Environmental Water Holder*, who hold the environmental entitlements (EEs);
- *Department of Environment Land Water and Planning*, who provide policy and funding support for the management of environmental water;
- *Melbourne and Southern Rural Water*, who operate the reservoirs where the EE allocations are stored;
- *Parks Victoria, Field and Game Australia*, and *individual landholders*, who manage land on which the EEs are used; and
- *Local agencies, community groups and individuals*, who have an interest in the use of environmental water such as irrigators, Gippsland Water, recreational users, environmental interests and Aboriginal communities.

WGCMA also has a significant interest in the other legally recognised components of the Environmental Water Reserve (passing flows and 'above cap' water), as these sources constitute the vast majority of water that contributes to environmental outcomes in any system (over 90% statewide).

2. Outcomes of environmental water use in West Gippsland

The outcomes of environmental water use in West Gippsland are considerable. Please find below some examples to substantiate this statement:

- Releases from environmental entitlements into the Thomson and Macalister rivers have triggered Australian grayling (a fish species listed under the Commonwealth Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act) to migrate and spawn. Environmental water has therefore helped ensure the survival of a nationally threatened species.
- Environmental water releases from Thomson Reservoir are, where possible, timed to maximise use by kayakers. This is an excellent example of how environmental water is being used to achieve multiple benefits for different water users: in this case a threatened fish and recreational users.
- Environmental water has been used in the lower Latrobe wetlands to help protect the ecological character of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site, in addition to providing recreational opportunities for duck hunters.

3. Responses to Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference 1: The assessment of the role of environmental water management in preventing or causing 'blackwater' events:

Environmental water management has not caused any blackwater events in West Gippsland. Blackwater events that are toxic to aquatic life are extremely uncommon in West Gippsland. While there is some potential to use environmental water to limit the occurrence of localised blackwater events, it is not feasible to use environmental water to prevent large scale blackwater events because:

- blackwater events generally result from large natural floods that inundate a rivers' floodplain, where the frequency of flooding has been reduced due to river regulation; and
- EEs cannot be used to increase the frequency of large scale flooding due to the need to prevent third party impacts, insufficient volume of water, and reservoir outlet constraints.

Thorough risk management is undertaken, in collaboration with our partners and stakeholders, during the development and implementation of annual watering plans for the use of environmental water. Where relevant, this includes consideration of adverse water quality conditions.

Terms of Reference 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:

Like all water users, environmental water managers utilise available management tools to help maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of their water use. The management tools available to environmental water managers in each system were negotiated with other entitlement holders when the EEs were established. Carry-over of environmental water is needed at times to achieve important environmental outcomes in a given year, due to the relatively small

volumes available from EEs on an annual basis. Carried forward EE volumes do not adversely impact the availability of water for irrigators or any other entitlement holders.

Terms of Reference 3: Consideration of what barriers exist to the more efficient use of environmental water and how these may be addressed:

WGCMA maximises the efficiency of its EE use by undertaking:

- thorough planning for and adaptive management of EE deliveries, including the use of management tools such as carryover; and
- targeted complementary works to improve the effectiveness of EE deliveries, such as erosion and weed control, revegetation, and fish passage provision.

The major barriers to increased efficiency (and effectiveness) of EE use in West Gippsland, and how these may be addressed, are as follows:

- Insufficient secure environmental water: The volume of water currently held in EEs in the Latrobe, Thomson and Macalister rivers, together with passing flows and above cap water, is not sufficient to provide the environmental flow regimes recommended for these rivers under historical climate, let alone under climate change. WGCMA will continue to work with partners and stakeholders to understand the nature and magnitude of shortfalls in environmental water demand, and to identify and implement options and opportunities to cost effectively minimise these shortfalls.
- Delivery constraints: Competition with other water users for the outlet capacity from reservoirs and other system specific constraints can reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of EE use. It is vital that the relevant stakeholders continue to work together constructively to ensure equitable access to water by all entitlement holders.
- Fish barriers: Many environmental watering actions in West Gippsland target migratory fish that depend on connected freshwater-estuary-marine habitats. Addressing the remaining fish barriers in the Thomson, Macalister and Latrobe catchments would greatly enhance the ecological benefits of environmental watering in West Gippsland. WGCMA has funding to address the most significant of these in the upper Thomson River.
- Watering infrastructure: Efficient provision of environmental water to Ramsar listed wetlands along the lower Latrobe River is compromised by a lack of appropriate watering infrastructure. Detailed designs for watering infrastructure are now complete for these wetlands. WGCMA will continue to look for opportunities to secure funding for these works.
- Waterway health works: Environmental watering alone cannot improve the health of aquatic ecosystems. It needs to be coupled with an ongoing program of complementary works to be most effective, including weed and erosion control, revegetation, and stock and pest animal control. The ability to implement complementary measures is subject to budget availability and other priorities. WGCMA has considerable unmet demand from landholders for waterway health works across our entire region, including along the Thomson, Macalister and Latrobe rivers.

Yours faithfully,

Martin Fuller
Chief Executive Officer