

Inquiry into Auditor General Report No.202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016)

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YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Inquiry into Auditor-General's report no. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016)
Submission by Gannawarra Shire Council

Gannawarra Shire Council thanks the Parliament of Victoria for the opportunity to provide a submission regarding the Inquiry into Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands.

Located in Northern Victoria, Gannawarra Shire Council is a small rural council and is home to the Kerang Wetlands Ramsar Site, approximately 250 kilometres north of Melbourne.

A cluster of 23 distinct wetlands, the Kerang Wetlands Ramsar Site covers an area of 9,793 hectares, and is part of a larger system of wetlands on the lower floodplains of the Murray, Loddon and Avoca Rivers.

The wetlands in the Ramsar Site form part of a much larger system of over 120 wetlands, 25 of which are also listed in the Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia. In 1982 the Kerang Wetlands were listed as a Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar Site) under the Ramsar Convention.

The wetlands provide important sanctuaries in the landscape for flora and fauna, and are popular spots for recreational activities including bird-watching, swimming, boating and canoeing, camping, picnicking, recreational fishing and hunting.

The wetlands are also a place of great cultural significance for the Barapa Barapa and Wamba Wamba peoples.

Additionally, the Kerang Wetlands sees visitors from all over Australia to participate in water sports and nature-based tourism. This provides an important contribution to the Shire's local economy, particularly hospitality and service-based industries. Many of these wetlands have also long supported the agriculture and service-based local economy, estimated to be worth \$283 million per year (2015).

In highlighting the significance of the Kerang Wetlands Ramsar Site to the community and region, Council welcomes the Auditor-General's report and its conclusions. In particular, Council agrees with the Auditor-General's recommendation regarding the need for improved governance, coordination and oversight of the management of Ramsar Sites, namely:

1. Council agrees that a more coordinated approach regarding the management of Ramsar Wetlands is required. However, this coordinated approach should involve contribution at a local level, specifically, greater involvement of local authorities.

While the report focuses on management of Ramsar Sites by DELWP and primary site managers (Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water) and the catchment management authorities, Council believes there is a lack of acknowledgement of the valuable role local input and feedback play in improving the monitoring and

conservation of these sites.

This includes Local Government, local water authorities, Traditional Owners, and local conservation groups, along with (as noted in the report) catchment management authorities, DELWP and Parks Victoria.

The Kerang Wetlands Ramsar Site Action Plan 2017-2025, recognises the role of Local Government in contributing to the management of the Kerang Wetlands Ramsar Site. Specifically, the document states that Gannawarra Shire Council is responsible for providing strategic direction and implementation on tourism and community experience across the Kerang Wetlands Ramsar Site. More broadly, the document recognises the role of councils in managing waterways in Victoria through their role as responsible planning authorities.

The document also highlights the contribution of local conservation groups and community members (such as Landcare, Waterwatch, 'Friends of' groups and Field and Game) in participating in regional planning, priority setting and implementing regional works programs. They also participate in monitoring and reporting of waterway conditions and can undertake projects in priority areas.

Additionally, the ongoing engagement of Traditional Owners groups in strategic and operational planning and works is essential to the sustainable, appropriate management of the Kerang Wetlands Ramsar Site.

2. The Auditor-General report notes that some Ramsar Sites in Victoria "are better managed than others". In particular, the report cites a Ramsar Site managed by Melbourne Water as an example. It identifies that this specific site "has a standalone management plan with clear roles and responsibilities for implementation and monitoring."

In alignment with this observation, Council believes that the development of Land and On Water Management Plans for individual Ramsar Sites are key to addressing the issue of management of Ramsar Sites, and the roles and responsibilities in implementation and monitoring of actions.

The local water authority within the Gannawarra Shire, Goulburn Murray Water, has successfully developed a number of Land and On Water Management Plans for local waterways. These plans are developed and implemented by the community, including through coordination with local councils and catchment management authorities.

Plans are implemented through a Land and On Water Management Plan Implementation Group. These groups consist of community representatives, local councils, Aboriginal groups' representatives, recreation groups and other agencies (such as catchment management authority, state government and local water authorities' representatives).

For example, Kow Swamp, located in Gunbower in the Campaspe Shire, has a Land and On Water Management Plan and Implementation Group. As well as assisting with the implementation and monitoring of actions in the plan, the Implementation Group engages local representatives, to provide input into the implementation of actions. Furthermore, the group provides a forum for agency representatives and the community to exchange ideas about the management of the swamp and discuss policy and regulatory changes relevant to its management.

The Implementation Group consists of a representative from Goulburn Murray Water, Local Government (Campaspe Shire and Gannawarra Shire), local Aboriginal corporation, an independent chairperson, government agencies (including DELWP) and a representative from the North Central Catchment Management Authority. Four community members, representing a broad range of interests including landholders, recreational users and tourism, also form part of the Implementation Group.

Ensuring local level input, and improving monitoring, accountability and evaluation through Land and On Water Management Plans will provide a clearer understanding of the priority values and threats at Ramsar Sites and future needs to ensure their continued conservation.

Council looks forward to the outcome of the Inquiry into Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands and hopes the feedback provided in this submission is considered.

Yours sincerely

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Confidentiality:

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