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***Project Manager - VRHS
Catchment and Water Division
Department of Natural Resources and Environment
PO box 500
East Melbourne, Victoria 3002***

30 April 2002

Dear Sir/Madam

I would like to make some comments with regard to the 'Healthy Rivers Healthy Communities & Regional Growth, Victorian River Health Strategy – Draft', unfortunately I've only had the draft copy for the last two weeks.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate the group involved in putting this document together. I believe the draft is an excellent example of a blueprint for future management and a clearly presented resource document.

Over the last 4 1/2 years, I have been involved as Secretary for the Leigh Catchment Group, which covers 890 square klms, involving 7 Landcare groups between Ballarat and Geelong. Our focus for the first 3 years of NHT funding was the Yarrowee River at the Ballarat end of the catchment, which becomes the Leigh River in my locality. It then joins the Barwon River at Inverleigh and flows on to Geelong before heading out to sea at Barwon Heads. Our group has concentrated on riparian appreciation and protection, weed removal and replacement with indigenous vegetation, water quality and education of the urban and upper catchment landowners of their responsibility to the river system. This work interlinks with the successful LINCS program work being achieved in the Ballarat area.

The Leigh River has a stunningly beautiful 25km section of steep escarpments and rocky gorges with intact vegetation levels, between Mt Mercer and Shelford. Neville Scarlett, Botanist, Latrobe University has prepared a National Estate nomination for this section of the river.

The following are comments I would like to make,

- There is a strong need to encourage all sectors of the community both urban and rural to share in the responsibility/ acceptance of their contribution to the deterioration of river health. The draft covers very well the rural contribution but in a general way deals with the urban contribution; we need to be brave enough to tell it as it really is!

Rivers are used to discharge waste and treated sewerage water from many urban centres. Although improvements have been made to the quality of treated sewerage, being discharged i.e. reduction in Phosphorus levels; storm water discharge is drained virtually unvetted into the river and is proving to be a challenging problem.

Urban populations need to be better informed of where their wastes go and how they contribute to the quality of the environment. It may not be possible to change this situation either now or in the immediate future but we do have a responsibility to be open about it.

-6.3.7 Roles of Water Authorities.p82. Water authorities should have a greater role and greater responsibility towards the improvement of river health. Presently, water authorities are seen as service providers, their focus is on supply of water, with less emphasis on environmental responsibility. Water authorities need to be seen, be involved, and have a leading role representing and informing urban communities.

-7.4 Emerging Issues, Groundwater. The issue of Water Authorities taking huge amounts of ground water to blend with their above ground supplies to provide the never ending urban demand for water, because this water can be paid for.
If we have a never-ending source of supply, does this encourage responsible use?

-Recent work has shown an increase in ground water salinity, will this impact on the appliances of urban users?

-For the Leigh River that have valuable characteristics like those mentioned and listed as Heritage Rivers, but are impacted upon by close urban association, what measures will we take in the future to protect them?

These are some of the issues I believe need greater exposure to the broader population. I hope this information will be a helpful contribution towards the final draft.
I look forward to viewing the completed document.

Sincerely



Jeanette Bellchambers,
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