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# A VISION FOR VICTORIA'S RIVERS

This section outlines:

- the vision for the management of rivers in Victoria;
- the broad conceptual basis for management; and
- the statewide targets for river restoration.

## 4. A Vision for Victoria's Rivers

The Victorian management framework establishes a vision for river health across Victoria, sets out a series of targets to get there, and puts in place the mechanisms to achieve these targets.

It is built on the foundations of community support and involvement, recognising that it is only with long-term support, commitment and a willingness by the community and Government to undergo change that any improvement in Victoria's rivers can be made.

### 4.1 THE VISION

The Government has a vision for the rivers of Victoria which is based on ecological sustainability.

Our rivers that are of the greatest value to the community will be protected as part of our natural heritage.

Our rivers will be ecologically healthy, managed within healthy catchments:

- supporting a diverse array of indigenous plants and animals within their waters and across their floodplains;
- flanked by a mostly continuous and broad band of native riparian vegetation;
- with flows that rise and fall with the seasons, inundating floodplains, filling billabongs and providing a flush of growth and return of essential nutrients back to the river;
- with water quality that sustains crucial ecological functions;
- with native fish and other species moving freely along the river and out to the floodplains and billabongs to feed and breed during inundation;
- replenishing productive estuaries or terminal lakes;

whilst

- providing the essential basis for efficient, high value sustainable agriculture and other resource-based industries;
- supplying clean and safe drinking water;
- providing pleasurable environments for those enjoying a range of leisure pursuits;
- preserving the values that are fundamental to our Indigenous cultures; and
- maintaining the rivers' place in our collective history.

Our communities will be confident and capable, appreciating the values of their rivers, understanding their dependency on healthy rivers and actively participating in decision-making.

## 4.2 IMPLEMENTING THE VISION

### 4.2.1 The Broad Approach

This vision is in the nature of 'a beacon on the hill' - a long term conceptual goal to which we aspire and to which our activities in the future will be directed.

Achieving this vision is not an easy task. Because we have identified the characteristics of ecologically healthy rivers and have gone some way towards quantifying them, we know that some areas of the State are closer to achieving the vision than others. In many areas, significant change in the current pattern of river uses will be required to achieve the vision. Getting there will require major community commitment and investment over a planning horizon of at least 50 years. It will require long term leadership, processes to manage conflict, agreed priority-setting processes, financial and human resources, improved technology, improved decision-making and processes to support those adversely affected by decisions. It will require a much greater focus on efficient resource utilisation so that greater economic returns are achieved with less water and a reduced environmental impact. It will require further shifts in community understanding and values.

The key will be to have a management approach which moves us towards the vision in achievable steps.

The management approach will be based on four key elements.

#### Management approach for achieving the vision:

- Protecting the rivers that are of highest community value from any decline in condition.
- Maintaining the condition of ecologically healthy rivers.
- Achieving an 'overall improvement' in the environmental condition of the remainder of the State's rivers.
- Preventing damage from future management activities.

This approach is a realistic one. It recognises that we have few rivers in good condition across Victoria and that urgent action is required to maintain these in their present condition, to ameliorate the impact of current management, to prevent or at least minimise future damage to all rivers, and to start the process of restoration in others. The approach is based on the simple philosophy of 'prevention is better than cure'.

#### The management approach will be implemented through three major planks:

- providing special protection for rivers and streams of very high value;
- establishing regional 5 and 10 year targets for river protection and restoration through community-driven regional planning processes; and
- establishing policies for specific management activities aimed at preventing damage to river health from future management activities and reducing the impact of current management activities.

Section 3 of the VRHS outlines in detail how this management approach will be implemented.

Section 4 outlines the policies and management arrangements for specific management activities affecting river health that will assist in protection and restoration, and will minimise the damage to river health from future river management activities.

#### 4.2.2 Protection and Restoration

Throughout the VRHS, the concepts of protection and restoration are used.

*Protection* is defined as 'ensuring that there is no further decline in environmental condition'.

*Restoration* is defined as 'improvement or enhancement of the environmental condition of the river in the direction of ecologically healthy.'

#### 4.2.3 Priority Setting and the Concept of 'Overall Improvement'

The establishment of regional targets requires regional communities to identify their priorities for river protection and restoration over the target period. These priorities will guide the action and investment by the community and Government in the rivers in their region.

Priorities for protection and restoration will be set on the basis of:

- protection of existing high value areas or areas in good condition; and
- restoration of those areas where there is:
  - the highest environmental and community gain for the resources invested, and
  - real community commitment towards long term improvement of river health.

This means that there will be areas that are not of immediate high priority for restoration and that therefore will not be addressed in the short term. However, it should be noted that work required to comply with any legal or statutory requirements will be undertaken wherever necessary.

The VRHS sets in place a framework for protection and active restoration, and for prevention of further damage, but recognises that within this framework some deterioration in existing condition could occur, due either to:

- ongoing degradation of areas that are not a priority for work; or
- new development which may have a very localised impact.

Whilst the VRHS will put in place policies to minimise the impact of new development, there will always be some very localised effects. Therefore, the VRHS uses the concept of 'overall improvement' in setting targets for river protection and restoration, and measuring progress against these targets.

#### 4.2.4 Aiming for 'Ecological Health'

The vision establishes the condition of 'ecologically healthy' as the aspirational goal for river management and restoration for rivers in Victoria. An ecologically healthy river is one where some change from the natural state may have occurred. It is a river where some aspects of river condition may have been traded off to provide for human use. However, overall, the major natural features, biodiversity and/or functions of the river are still present and will continue into the future. Essentially, it is a river where a balance may have been struck between human use and the ecology of the river – a balance where the integrity of the system is still preserved, a reasonable level of human needs can be met and where both can be sustained into the future. The major characteristics of an ecologically healthy river are described in section 2.4.1.

For the majority of rivers, the achievement of this goal is possible. It may be difficult. It may require significant community and government commitment and a long timeframe to achieve it but it is possible.

For a number of river reaches immediately downstream of existing major dams or affected by existing urban infrastructure, the concept of returning them to a condition where the general reference point is based on their pre-European state may not be possible. In these cases, the structures in place may have significantly changed the hydrology, the channel shape or floodplain linkages. However, even in these cases, the concept of 'ecological health' will still be used to establish long-term goals for these systems by changing the reference point and aiming for the ecologically healthy state of a river more closely approximating its current hydrology and channel condition, such as a river of a smaller size or stream order, or a different river class or ecosystem type. Further work will be undertaken to determine the characteristics for ecological health for each system.

### 4.3 STATEWIDE TARGETS

In working towards the vision, the following targets for river protection and restoration will be used to measure progress across the State.

All Heritage Rivers to be maintained at least to their current condition and their Heritage River values protected.

By 2021:

- one major representative river reach in ecologically healthy condition in each major river class.
- an increase of 3000 km in the length of rivers in excellent or good condition.

By 2011:

- an improvement in the status of designated freshwater-dependent focal species.
- significant improvements achieved in environmental flow regimes of 20 high value river reaches currently flow stressed.
- 4800 km of rivers with improvement of one rating in the measurement of riparian condition.
- an increase of 7000 ha of riparian areas under management agreements.
- 600 km of rivers where instream habitat has been reinstated.
- 95% of all highland and upland and 60% of all lowland monitoring sites will meet SEPP environmental quality objectives.
- 1000 high value public assets provided with appropriate level of protection.

By 2005:

- an increase in length of river accessible to native fish by an additional 2000 km.
- significant improvement in floodplain linkages in ten areas of national and/or State significance.
- all rivers with either sustainable catchment limits or negotiated environmental flows in place.
- report on the second benchmarking of the environmental condition of Victorian rivers.
- a quarter of agricultural production produced from natural resources that are managed within their capacity. By 2015, this will increase to half of agricultural production (as stated in *Victoria's Salinity Management Framework*).

Progress towards the achievement of these targets will be measured through regular reporting on river protection and restoration activities, and through regular resource condition monitoring.

#### 4.4 PRINCIPLES FOR IMPLEMENTING THE VISION

Achieving the vision requires a long term concerted effort and continued investment by the Victorian community. The method by which this will be achieved will be through regional waterway health planning and implementation processes. The following principles will be used to guide these processes. These principles are consistent with the broader integrated catchment management (ICM) principles, the catchment-to-coast approach and the principles outlined in the *SEPP (Waters of Victoria)*.

##### **Integrated Catchment-to-Coast Management**

Decisions affecting river health must be made within an ICM context:

- recognising the integral relationship between rivers and their catchments, their position within broader landscapes, and their linkages with and importance for coastal systems;
- addressing problem causes as well as symptoms; and
- balancing social, economic and environmental needs.

##### **Integrated River Health Outcomes**

Outcomes sought are improvements in river health. Management programs should be aimed to deliver the best possible river health outcomes across the range of management activities within the waterways and catchments.

##### **Community Involvement**

Communities and stakeholder groups will have the opportunity to be involved in all the major phases of planning and implementation of programs affecting river health.

##### **Decision-making Processes**

Regional communities may need to consider a number of difficult issues in planning on river health and may have to make trade-off decisions. To ensure that the most appropriate decision is made, decision-making processes on issues related to river health will:

- use the best available scientific information;
- ensure access to decision-making for all stakeholders in river health;
- be open and transparent, providing available information to all stakeholders and justifying decisions as they are made;
- be in accordance with the Precautionary Principle;
- be based on a risk-based approach; and
- be guided by a careful evaluation to avoid serious or irreversible damage to the environment wherever practicable.

##### **Shared Responsibility and Partnerships**

All members of the community, including industry, landholders, individuals, and rural and urban communities, derive benefits from the use of rivers and streams and share responsibility for managing these resources sustainably. Ecologically sustainable management of rivers and streams can only be achieved through a long term partnership between all these parties – Government, communities, industry, landholders and individuals, each with clear agreed roles.

**Stewardship of Natural Resources**

In determining roles and responsibilities, all natural resource users and managers will recognise their dependence on a healthy resource and will have a duty of care to ensure that they do not damage the natural resource base and that they take all reasonable steps to protect land and water resources.

**Mechanisms**

Mechanisms used to achieve improved river health will be an innovative mix of improved planning, market mechanisms, regulation, industry self-regulation and on-ground works.

**Investment**

Relative contributions to investment in river management and restoration will reflect the long term private and public costs and benefits involved.

**Accountability**

Roles and responsibilities for river health will be identified and progress towards meeting State and regional targets will be measured. Those involved will be clearly accountable to Government and the community for river health outcomes.

**Adaptive Management**

Recognising the variability of natural systems and our incomplete knowledge of river and catchment processes requires that management of river health should be adaptive, improving in response to knowledge gained through monitoring and research.