



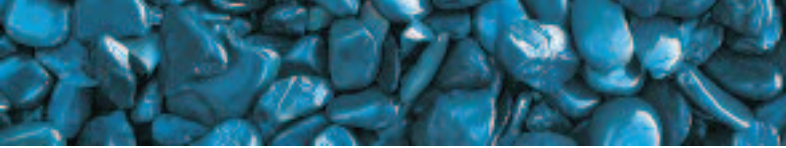
# Stream Flow Management Plans

## Frequently asked **questions** and **answers**



Our Water  
Our Future  
A Victorian Government initiative





## Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

### How is water allocated in Victoria?

The rights and obligations of individuals and organisations that harvest water are specified in legal documents that include surface water and groundwater licences, tradeable water rights and bulk water entitlements allocated to water authorities.

These rights and obligations are part of the Victorian Government's water allocation framework, which also includes planning processes to ensure that important water management issues will be addressed (e.g. Stream Flow Management Plans).

### What is an Unregulated River?

An unregulated river is a river that doesn't have a significant (publicly owned and managed) on stream storage that would alter the river's natural streamflow regime. Unregulated rivers do not have storages that release flows to the river to meet downstream irrigation needs.

### What is the Restoring Unregulated Rivers Initiative?


It aims to ensure streamflows in unregulated rivers are sustainably managed for all uses. The initiative introduces changes to improve the allocation and use of Victoria's water resources in all unregulated rivers.

### Why is the Restoring Unregulated Rivers Initiative happening?

To implement Victorian Government policy (*Our Water Our Future*, 2004) that will:

- Protect streamflows in those unregulated rivers that are not currently significantly stressed.
- Respond to the poor state of Victoria's priority, flow stressed, unregulated rivers by enhancing the Environmental Water Reserve.
- Achieve a balance and provide certainty for all water users, in both upstream and downstream catchments.
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities associated with water use.





Protection Area and at the same time call for expressions of interest for stakeholder representation on a consultative committee.

Following the Minister for Water's approval of that intent, a Stream Flow Management Plan is prepared using the best available science, water allocation and use model and local information. A community based consultative committee comprising representatives from a range of stakeholders prepare a draft Stream Flow Management Plan.

Members of the consultative committee include consumptive water users (who make up 50% of the committee), non-government organisations and government organisations with statutory responsibilities. Examples are shown below:

#### **Non-government organisations represented:**

- Environment Victoria
- Industry groups
- Victorian Farmers Federation
- Indigenous groups
- VRFish (Victorian Recreational Fisheries Peak Body)

#### **Government organisations represented:**

- Licensing authorities
- Catchment management Authorities / Melbourne Water
- Environment Protection Authority
- Urban water authority
- Local government
- Department of Sustainability and Environment
- Department of Primary Industries

Decision-making of the consultative committee is by consensus in accordance with the guidelines provided by the Minister. This means members agree in principle that the proposed prescriptions in the draft Stream Flow Management Plan are a fair and reasonable means of achieving its objectives. Following preparation of the draft Stream Flow Management Plan by the consultative committee, affected communities and stakeholders will be invited to submit comments for consideration of the consultative committee before submitting it to the Minister for Water for approval.

## **What is a Water Supply Protection Area (WSPA)?**

A requirement of the *Water Act 1989* is the declaration of a WSPA to occur before a draft Stream Flow Management Plan can be prepared. Water Supply Protection Areas are declared to protect the water resources of surface water catchments, groundwater aquifers or both. Once a catchment is declared, all water trading into and out of it is suspended until the approval of a draft Stream Flow Management Plan.

## **How do I join a Stream Flow Management Plan Consultative Committee?**

All relevant stakeholders with an interest in the outcomes of a Stream Flow Management Plan are invited to express their interest in nominating for the consultative committee to the licensing authority when the intent to declare the catchment as a WSPA is advertised.

Following their expression of interest, stakeholders who nominate for consultative committee membership will be required to satisfy background checks before being appointed by the Minister for Water to prepare the draft Stream Flow Management Plan.

Stakeholder representation and appointment to consultative committees follows a legislative process therefore not all nominees may be eligible for committee membership.

## **How good is the science that underpins the Stream Flow Management Plans and Environmental Water Reserves for stressed rivers?**

Determining a river's environmental water requirement requires a multi-disciplinary approach that encompasses the entire flow regime rather than looking only at minimum streamflows. The FLOWS assessment tool is the Victorian endorsed method for determining the environmental water requirements for a healthy river. This tool is a rigorous, clear and independent process that links environmental objectives with streamflow requirements. In most cases a Technical Audit Panel (TAP), an expert panel appointed by the Minister for Water, provide a review. The TAP reviews technical information to ensure the best available scientific and water allocation and use information was used in preparing the draft Stream Flow Management Plan.



## **Why develop Stream Flow Management Plans?**

Streamflows are a major determinant of the health of a river. Water extraction can change streamflow regimes that can detrimentally impact a river's environmental values. However we do not need to restore fully natural flows (i.e. streamflows that occurred prior to European settlement) to achieve an ecologically healthy river.

A Stream Flow Management Plan aims to strike the right balance between consumptive use and the ecology of the river.

Victorians expect its water resources to supply water for consumptive use (urban and irrigation) for current and future generations. However licence holders can lessen the impact of water extraction from rivers by changing the timing and duration of this extraction through the introduction of Stream Flow Management Plans.

## **Can a Stream Flow Management Plan affect a farmer's reliability?**

A farmer's reliability of supply may be affected by rainfall, farm dams, other licensed users, stock and domestic users and the level of interaction between surface water and groundwater. A Stream Flow Management Plan aims to protect existing licensed users' access to streamflows and the environment by introducing rules to meet agreed management objectives.

Expectations of 100% reliability of supply of water from unregulated rivers can not be met due to the natural unreliability of rainfall, which is particularly true for an Australian climate.

## **Are existing licence holder's "water rights" being changed?**

Licence holders do not have "water rights" from unregulated rivers. Individuals are issued with a licence annually (or in some cases issued with a 15 year licence) to extract water from an unregulated river for irrigation or commercial use.

Consultative committees, through a Stream Flow Management Plan may or may not propose to change a licence holder's licensed volume and may or may not propose to change the way farmers currently access water. This could be a move from all year / summer diversions to winter fill to reduce the ecological stress caused by summer diversions.

## **What if I am required to change the way I currently access water?**

The Victorian Government is committed to achieving Environmental Water Reserves in priority unregulated rivers by co-investing in on-ground activities with licence holders. Licence holders will be given flexibility to decide how they will change the way they currently access and use water to implement a Stream Flow Management Plan.

## **What is the Environmental Water Reserve?**

The Environmental Water Reserve is the legal share of water for all Victorian rivers, streams and groundwater aquifers. It is the water set aside to maintain the environmental values of a river or groundwater system and other water services which are dependant on the environmental condition of that system.

## **When can I seek assistance to help pay for construction of a dam on my farm?**

Assistance to implement a Stream Flow Management Plan will be available after the Minister for Water approves the plan. More detailed information to assist licence holders will be available from rural water authorities and Catchment Management Authorities from September 2006.

Transitional grants are still available to purchase water, prepare farm plans, undertake environmental assessments of new dam locations, and design and construct new dams as part of the *Water (Irrigation Farm Dams) Act 2002* implementation package. For further information or an assessment of your grant eligibility contact your rural water authority.

## **How will urban users be affected by Stream Flow Management Plans?**

Urban users are not usually affected by a Stream Flow Management Plan. However enhancement to the Environmental Water Reserve as a result of on-ground activities carried out by licence holders to implement a Stream Flow Management Plan will not be used to improve the reliability of supply of urban water authorities.





## **Why is metering considered necessary for all significant licensed water users?**

Our water resources are finite and must be better managed as demands for water increase. Metering of licensed diversions is a key requirement for proper water management. Meters:

- Improve farmer and water resource manager understanding of water use patterns.
- Are a primary mechanism for managing compliance with licence conditions and entitlements by enabling water users to operate in accordance with licence conditions and within their entitlements.
- Enable farmers to achieve on-farm water efficiency objectives.
- Assist sharing available water resources between all uses.

Urban water suppliers, urban water users and farmers in irrigation districts have been metered for many years and almost half of groundwater extractions and diversions from rivers are already metered.

## **Why do farmers have to pay for the cost of metering?**

Metering is an essential management tool to enable proper management of Victoria's water resources. Appropriate water pricing supports the sustainable management of our water resources. All new licensed diversions are required to meter their use and pay for the cost of installing their meters.

Existing licensed irrigation and commercial water users contribute to the cost of metering and the Victorian Government is offsetting these costs by around \$400 per meter.

## **Will all water use be metered?**

The Victorian Government's policy in *Our Water Our Future* states that for both groundwater and unregulated surface water licences all commercial and irrigation use will be metered within three years. For reasons of practicality and cost effectiveness, licensing authorities and the Victorian Government have introduced metering thresholds of:

- 10 megalitres and greater for licences to take and use unregulated surface water; and

- 20 megalitres and greater for licences to take and use groundwater.

In the interests of gaining a better understanding of water use, improving the management of water and facilitating licence volume trade in a catchment a Stream Flow Management Plan may recommend the metering of all water use in addition to the thresholds described above.

## **Are Stream Flow Management Plans broader than just streamflows in an unregulated river?**

No. Whilst Stream Flow Management Plans only deal with surface water allocation and use, Catchment Management Authorities work with landholders to carry out complementary river health activities in priority catchments outlined in River Health Strategies.

## **What is an Ecologically Healthy River?**

A healthy river is defined as one that still has the major ecological features and a way of functioning as it did prior to European settlement. It also should be able to sustain these characteristics into the future. However, to be healthy, a river does not need to be pristine.

Stream Flow Management Plans aim to meet a set of environmental objectives agreed to by the community based consultative committee. These agreed environmental objectives may aim to return the river or stream to an ecologically healthy river over time in association with other complementary river health protection and restoration activities.

## **What else is being done to protect and restore Victoria's rivers?**

The Department of Sustainability and Environment in partnership with Victoria's caretakers of river health, the Catchment Management Authorities, are tackling the causes of poor river health affecting two thirds of Victoria's rivers. These include the control of bank erosion, fencing out riparian (river bank and floodplain) vegetation, installing off-stream watering points for stock, excluding stock from accessing waterways and removing barriers to fish migration. The CMAs work with their regional communities to collectively treat the problems of changed flows, declining water quality and degraded riverine habitats, while restoring



stressed rivers and protecting healthy ones. This will sustain riverine habitats for our unique animals and plants; provide ongoing recreational, tourism and fishing opportunities; and reduce the costs of providing high quality water. Further details are provided in the Victorian Government's *Our Water Our Future* action plan, the Victorian River Health Strategy and their supporting Regional River Health Strategies.

### **How is the environmental condition of the unregulated river defined?**

In 1999, the Victorian Government, in conjunction with its CMAs benchmarked the environmental condition of Victoria's major rivers and tributaries using the Index of Stream Condition (ISC). It was the first comprehensive study of the environmental condition of rivers anywhere in Australia that included information on streamflow, channel form, water quality, aquatic life and the riparian zone. Before the Victorian benchmarking exercise, assessment of river health considered single features such as water quality or aquatic macroinvertebrates. Data for the second benchmark study was collected in 2004 and is published and available in a report on the web ([www.vicwaterdata.net](http://www.vicwaterdata.net)).

## Further information

For more information about the Stream Flow Management Plans please contact:

### **DSE Customer Service Centre 136 186**

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