



MARCHMENT HILL

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Water for Victoria Discussion Paper “Thoroughly Ambitious”

Launched by Minister Neville at the CEDA lunch on 16th March, the Water for Victoria Discussion Paper is a comprehensive repositioning of the state’s aspirations for water planning and management, intended to guide the industry’s endeavours for several decades.

Fresh vision

Water for Victoria takes the long view. It brings together extensive input and fields of knowledge into a well-modulated synopsis of the major issues and opportunities for water in our communities. The ‘breadth’ in the plan stems from placing water values, or stakeholders, on the same level by devoting separate chapters to waterway and catchment health, agriculture, cities and towns, Aboriginal communities and recreation.

This is a marked departure from previous approaches where values have been addressed in a hierarchy. Water for Victoria pitches a fresh vision for ‘managing water together’. The vision starts with the goal of sustainable development ‘manage water to support a healthy environment, a prosperous economy and thriving communities, now and into the future’. What is new is how communities are to be placed ‘at the centre of decision-making’, how drought and climate change resilience are to be explicitly tackled and the recognition that innovation, or doing new things in new ways, will be essential to achieving the vision.

A strong contextual picture

The uncertainties and impacts of climate change are placed first in this Discussion Paper. Coupled with the challenges of population growth and economic prosperity, these pressures drive the need for more integrated and inclusive approaches to water planning and management. Keeping a focus on what actions we can take, Water for Victoria is at once pragmatic and shies away from emphasising the harsher realities we may need to face as a community.

However, the document prepares for these shifts by clarifying the information that must be provided to community and other interests by the water industry, and allowing for community-centred decisions on the paths to be taken. An example is the shift in how we deal with more intense rainfall events, and whether the community is prepared to accept a different paradigm of warning in place of full prevention of adverse flooding impacts.

Building on previous policy and experience

Water for Victoria builds carefully on a body of previous policy and planning work. In doing so, the document reflects what has been learned. For example, the unbundling of water from land to help reassign irrigation away from degraded land and associated salinization, quickly morphed into a water trading system to rebalance water supplies

and demands. Refinements, such as carryover, extended the application of these property and sharing approaches. In the urban context, the Millennium drought demonstrated the deep connection between community wellbeing and simple amenities, such as football fields. We also learned about community commitment, ingenuity and sheer determination when it came to water conservation efforts.

The plan reflects a modern starting point. Human health gets scant mention, though it was the genesis of the water industry and has the potential to re-emerge as we draw on more diverse water sources and decentralised processes. Rural water approaches gain from efforts of the last 20 years in delivery and on-farm water efficiency. Indeed, rural water trading provides a current example of how the focus of decision can shift, allowing water users to participate more actively in their own risk position. Yet this plan pinpoints outstanding issues in rural water, for example, reasonable use limits on domestic and stock arrangements and a review of water use licences.

Perhaps the biggest shift is to place climate change at the head of the water plan. The government is sending a strong message about preparedness, resilience and participation in decisions, recognising the possibility that climate change may bring challenges that lie beyond existing approaches and capacities to pay.

Linkages across government

As well as building on its antecedents, Water for Victoria explains the linkages between water policies and plans and other government instruments. Figure 1 illustrates these linkages.



Figure 1: Water for Victoria - Linkages across government

Instruments referenced in Water for Victoria	
Water for Victoria under Climate Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate Change Act 2010 (review Feb 2016) • Victorian Climate Change Framework for Action (in preparation) • Victorian Renewable Energy Action Plan (due 2016) • Victorian Renewable Energy Roadmap (to 2020)
Waterway & Catchment Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State Planning Policy Framework • Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2036 • Our Catchments Our Communities - Integrated Catchment Management in Victoria (2016-2019) • Victorian Waterway Management Strategy 2013 • Murray Darling Basin Plan 2012 • Regional Riparian Action Plan 2015-2020 • State Environment Protection Policy Waters of Victoria (under review) • Sustainable Water Strategies (2005-2011) • Ramsar Treaties
Water for Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basin Salinity Management Strategy 2030 • Sustainable Irrigation Program • Victorian Government Food & Fibre Sector Strategy 2016 • Victoria's Regional Statement 2015 • Murray Darling Basin Plan 2012 • Victorian Rural Drainage Strategy (due 2018) • Victorian Irrigation Drainage Program (5 years) • Regional Partnerships • Regional Strategic Plans • Regional Growth Plans
Resilient & Liveable Cities & Towns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Growth Plans • Precinct Structure Plans • National Employment Clusters • Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2036 • Victoria Public Health & Wellbeing Plan (2015-2019) • Plan Melbourne Refresh • Resilient Melbourne Initiative • Metropolitan Open Space Strategy • Environment Management Plan for Port Phillip Bay (under review) • Urban Water Strategies • Yarra River Protection Project • Environmentally Sustainable Standards & Systems • Schools Water Efficiency Program
Recognising & Managing for Aboriginal Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Water Initiative • Murray Darling Basin Plan • Commonwealth Native Title Act 1993 • Council of Australian Governments Closing the Gap • Victorian Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010 • Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework • Whole of Country Plans • Aboriginal Partnerships Action Plan • Munganin Gadhaba Aboriginal Inclusion Plan 2016-2020 • Aboriginal Water Program • Sustainable Water Strategies • State Environment Protection Policy Waters of Victoria (under review)
Recognising Recreational Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreation Urban Storage Ancillary Fee • Recreation Contribution Charge
Water Entitlement & Planning Frameworks, Grid & Markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water Act 1989 • Our Water Our Future 2004 • Commonwealth Water Act 2007 • Murray Darling Basin Plan 2012 • Water Resources Assessment Program • Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy (due 2016) • Sustainable Water Strategies • Urban Water Strategies • Regional River Health Strategies • Victoria's Regional Statement 2015 • Victorian Water Register • Southern Market Trial (2016-2021)

By linking clearly to previous policy, existing instruments and future proposals across State and Federal government portfolios, Water for Victoria presents an efficient whole-of-government approach. For example, the chapter ‘Water Entitlement and Planning Frameworks’ proposes streamlining water resources management by aligning the multiple State and Federal requirements for resource plans.

Leading the way

Having developed a thorough picture of the many interdependent issues to be tackled in water over the next several decades, the final three chapters of Water for Victoria move to ‘the how’. An example of the pragmatism of the plan is the selection of 36 priority streams and rivers for coordinated remedial attention over the next 30 years. Accepting that spreading resources too thinly will achieve nothing, Water for Victoria makes a pitch for measurable and lasting gains.

Less fully articulated are the governance and management instruments that will drive the new integrated and community-centred approach. Describing the current most promising management levers - ‘Water Entitlement and Planning Frameworks and ‘The Potential of the Grid and Markets’ - the plan stops short of articulating how multiple interests are to be navigated and negotiated in a changing world. The risk here is that we build complex and *ad hoc* arrangements that fail the tests of ‘good governance’, for example, efficiency and transparency. Water for Victoria does acknowledge these challenges, proposing, for example, more systematic approaches to integrated water management in growth areas, and a water markets trial in southern Victoria to extend the benefits of the grid. However, the plan assumes a continuation of the *status quo* on statutory roles and responsibilities, which may in time hamper the achievement of the vision.

Institutional strengthening and strategic innovation

The final chapter ‘Jobs, Economy and Innovation’, celebrates the achievements and future potential of the Victorian water industry, such as the Intelligent Water Networks group and export opportunities. This chapter focuses on institutional strengthening, for example, through benchmarking for efficiency. A range of governance and management issues are raised but there is no clear framework through which these are addressed. A stronger focus on strategic innovation and institutional strengthening could provide a useful framework.

On the broader role of water in the economy, the connection to regional prosperity is well-drawn through the earlier chapters, in particular, through the theme of information provision to enable better decisions in water-related sectors.

Extensive stakeholder consultation

Water for Victoria has grown organically from a wide range of industry and stakeholder inputs and discussions. The current Discussion Paper has been made widely available and the period for comment has been extended. Open attendance events have been scheduled around Victoria.

Having attended many similar consultations, the Water for Victoria event was a welcome change in both its design and tone. All voices were made welcome, and through a planned facilitation process, many community inputs were successfully surfaced and

captured. As an example of what community-centred decision-making might look like in practice, this was very encouraging.