

Reconnecting River Country Program

Communique from meeting #1 with private landholder reference groups

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and we show our respect for Elders past, present and emerging through thoughtful and collaborative approaches to our work, seeking to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to providing places in which Aboriginal people are included socially, culturally and economically.

Introduction

The Reconnecting River Country Program landholder reference groups met for the first time in early June 2023 to hear the latest updates on key components of the program and to begin the process of providing feedback to inform development being considered by the program.

Two private landholder reference groups have been established for the Murray project area and one for the Murrumbidgee project area. Each group consists of four to six members with each member representing a minimum of five declared stakeholders.

During a series of independently facilitated workshops, reference group members had the opportunity to hear from program staff, to ask questions and provide their initial thoughts on:

- the program's context and progress
- flow options being considered
- mitigation principles
- potential mitigation works
- flow corridors.

The content presented was consistent across each group. Discussions with reference group members were focused on program-wide positions or policies.

In addition to our consultation through the reference groups, we are also speaking directly with landholders to gather their specific property information and share information about the Impact Management Toolbox.

Program update

The program is in the development phase and is currently funded to October 2023. To date, the program has completed a needs analysis (2020-2021) and strategic business cases for the Murray (July 2022) and Murrumbidgee (October 2022) project areas.

The NSW and Australian Governments are currently discussing the next steps for this program. The program is continuing to engage with stakeholders to better understand the needs of individual landholders and seek informed feedback to refine program development.

Subject to funding in 2023, we are working toward a final business case(s) incorporating refined descriptions of environmental, social, economic, and cultural impacts and benefits, mitigation options, compensation framework for works and measures, delivery costs and a flow option recommendation. The final business case(s) will be submitted to the Australian Government for assessment and an investment decision for program delivery.

The reference group process is one of several engagement approaches allowing us to reach more stakeholders and incorporate a diverse range of perspectives into program development being considered and the refined final business case(s).

Flow options

The program is considering several flow options in the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers. These options were presented to the reference groups and the proposed frequency, timing and duration of flows were discussed. The members heard why there is a need to relax constraints for the efficient delivery of environmental water and discussed some of the predicted environmental benefits. In the Murray catchment, the program is considering the following flow options:

Hume to Yarrawonga (Doctor's Point gauge)

Flow ML/d	Level (metres)
25,000 (current limit)	3.74
30,000	4.11
35,000	4.46
40,000	4.81

Yarrawonga to Wakool Junction (downstream of Yarrawonga Gauge)

Flow ML/d	Level (metres)
15,000 (current limit)	2.23
25,000	3.27
30,000	3.67

Flow ML/d	Level (metres)
35,000	4.05
40,000	4.41
45,000	4.75

In the Murrumbidgee catchment, the program is considering flow options of:

Wagga Wagga Gauge

Flow ML/d	Level (metres)
22,000 (Base case)	3.9
32,000	5.2
36,000	5.6
40,000	6.1

Mitigation principles

The reference groups heard that if the program advances to delivery phase, then mitigation would be determined through good faith negotiations and agreements with each landholder, guided by the program's mitigation principles and the proposed Landholder Negotiation Scheme. Reference group members also heard how feedback from stakeholders (via a public survey in early 2022) informed changes to the mitigation principles.

Mitigation works

Reference group members were introduced to a proposed suite of works and measures being considered by the program, which are currently open for feedback. Reference group discussions were aimed at program-wide positions or policies rather than the needs of individual properties.

It was noted that input for the final business case(s) (subject to funding) is being informed by on-ground property-specific engagement with registered landholders. A desktop assessment is being conducted for those properties unable to be visited due to time and resource limitations. Meeting participants also heard if the program proceeds to delivery, property-specific mitigation works would be determined with landholders during the negotiation period, on a property-by-property basis, as part of a package including compensation.

Flow corridors

Reference group members heard that flow corridors are being considered by the program. A flow corridor is the area of land to be used to convey water for the environment flows up to the selected flow option, including flow buffers (if applicable).

The meeting heard flow corridors are needed to:

- provide river operators with the right to release water for the environment up to the flow limit, within the flow corridor
- provide landholders with certainty on the maximum flow extent expected from environmental water releases.

Easements and covenants are being explored by the program as mechanisms to secure the flow corridor. Members were encouraged to provide feedback on flow corridors and easements to assist program development.

Inundation maps, available through the program's information hub, indicate preliminary flow corridors for the flow options being considered. These maps provide important information for landholders to help better understand the potential impacts and benefits on their properties. The program team is engaging with landholders and other stakeholders to ground truth and refine the modelling before it is finalised.

To view the program's inundation mapping visit water.dpie.nsw.gov.au/water-infrastructure-nsw/sdlam/reconnecting-river-country-program/inundation-mapping

Seeking landholder feedback

Landholder reference group members were appointed via an Expression of Interest process earlier this year. This process was open to all landholders across the project area. Each applicant was required to identify at least five declared stakeholders they would consult with to provide feedback to the program.

Following the meeting, supporting materials were provided to members to share with their declared stakeholders. Feedback was gathered via a survey asking questions on each of the topics presented. This survey was designed to allow members and declared stakeholders to provide individual submissions directly to the program. Members were informed they are not expected to reach a consensus with their network of declared stakeholders as diverse opinions are welcomed.

Next steps

The feedback provided by the reference group members, and their declared stakeholders, will be used to inform the ongoing development of the program.

Feedback received will help inform the content for the second reference group meeting, to be held week commencing 31 July 2023. Items proposed for discussion in this second meeting include the compensation approach, easements, agreements and negotiation assistance.

Ongoing engagement opportunities

Reference groups are just one way landholders can provide feedback to the program. Over the last two years, the program has also consulted with affected stakeholders in several ways including:

- through property-scale case studies
- on-Country assessments
- through local advocacy groups
- via online case studies.

If you are a landholder with property impacted by the flow options being considered by the program, and would like to be involved in property specific engagement, register [here](#).

Find out more

For more information about the program:

- visit dpie.nsw.gov.au/reconnecting-river-country-program
- email admin.rrcp@dpie.nsw.gov.au
- subscribe for [program updates](#).

To view the program's inundation mapping visit dpie.nsw.gov.au/rrcp-infohub