

30 June 2023

## Riverina Local Land Services submission to the Natural Resources Commission review of the Murrumbidgee Regulated Water Source 2016

### Introduction

Local Land Services is a regional-focused NSW Government agency delivering quality customer services to farmers, landholders and the wider community.

*Our Vision: Vibrant communities in productive, healthy landscapes.*

*Our Mission: To be a customer-focused business that enables improved primary production and better management of natural resources.*

The Riverina has a great diversity of landscapes ranging from the sub alpine areas of the Great Dividing Range to the semi-arid plains. The Murrumbidgee River and its tributaries brings these landscapes and the people who live in the region together. The region contains water-dependent natural assets of international importance including the Ramsar listed Fivebough and Tuckerbil wetlands near Leeton, the mid Murrumbidgee and the Lowbidgee wetlands. Riverina Local Land Services works closely with a diverse range of stakeholders including government agencies and landholders to undertake programs and improve management of these assets and the species that depend upon them.

This submission contains two sections, these being:

- General observations and key messages conveyed to Riverina Local Land Services by our customers and consultative groups.
- Suggested amendments to the Water Sharing Plan for the Murrumbidgee Regulated River Water Source 2016 that are endorsed by Riverina Local Land Services.

### General observations and key messages conveyed to Riverina Local Land Services.

- The overarching environmental objective of the Water Sharing Plan (WSP) “is to protect and contribute to the enhancement of the ecological condition of the water source and its water dependant ecosystem.” It is noted that the ecological condition of many wetlands is being maintained or improved.
- Mechanisms for the delivery of environmental water would appear to meet the needs of the Annual Watering Plans, subject to resource availability and constraints within the system.

- The impacts of climate change could result in higher evaporation rates, decreased snow and snow melts, higher minimum and maximum temperatures and changing rainfall patterns resulting in less run off. The water sharing plan must be able to accommodate changes in extreme events.
- Water quality issues such as blue-green algae blooms and hypoxic black water events in the lower reaches of the Murrumbidgee River and Yanco Creek are an issue in drier years with the potential to become more frequent with climate change.
- The contribution of the WSP to aboriginal cultural outcomes is limited. Under the Murrumbidgee Regulated River Water Sharing Plan (2016), and Access Licence of the subcategory “Aboriginal Cultural” may only be granted for:

*The taking of water by an Aboriginal person or Aboriginal community for any personal, domestic, or communal purpose, including drinking, food preparation, washing, manufacturing traditional artefacts, watering domestic gardens, cultural teaching, hunting, fishing, gathering and for recreational, cultural, and ceremonial purposes.*

- A review of usage of the Cultural Access Licence reveals that it is underutilised with water only being used at one site in the majority of years. There are a number of factors that contribute to this poor outcome.
- Landholders in the regulated section of the river hold concerns regarding enhanced flood flows for environmental purposes on private property.
- Conversely, the ability to piggy-back environmental water on translucency flows is a very useful tool for providing water to mid and lower Murrumbidgee wetlands that sit high in the landscape, thereby providing improved connectivity between the flood plain, wetlands and the river.
- The Yanco Creek system (Yanco, Billabong, Colombo and Forest Creeks) has been identified as a priority site for inclusion in the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism project with on-going negotiations with the community currently being undertaken. The key objective of the project is to improve water management, maintain base flows in the system and improve conditions for key ecological areas identified in the system.
- A number of identified wetlands included in environmental watering plans are located on private land and water is pumped to the site using the landholders infrastructure and Water Access Licence. Currently it is not possible to link works order to these sites so that supplementary water can be used as part of the suite of options available to improve wetland health.
- Whilst the Murrumbidgee Regulated Water Sharing Plan doesn’t allow applications to be made for any other specific water access licences to achieve outcomes for Aboriginal communities, the Water Management (General) Regulation 2011 does provide for a subcategory of “Aboriginal Commercial”. This suggests that upon review of the Murrumbidgee Regulated Water Sharing Plan there may be opportunity to change the existing Cultural Access Licence to an Aboriginal Commercial sub-category or allow applications to be made for both this category and for Aboriginal cultural.

## Suggested amendments to the Water Sharing Plan for the Murrumbidgee Regulated River Water Source 2016 that are endorsed by Riverina Local Land Services.

- Limiting the cultural access licence to non-commercial use substantially limits the benefit of this licence to Aboriginal people. Designating this licence as a high security licence signifies the ability to access this water in the vast majority of years. The purpose for which it is used does not significantly impact other water users. It is therefore recommended that this water be made available for commercial purposes.
- Likewise, it is recommended that the cultural access licence is tradable to provide financial capital for reinvestment in Aboriginal communities. This would contribute to a 'Closing the Gap' target.
- The need to access water via existing Works Approvals significantly limits the benefit of the cultural access licence. Basically, all existing Works Approvals were established to deliver long-term commercial outcomes and are linked to water distribution assets for commercial purposes. Yet there are numerous opportunities to obtain Aboriginal cultural benefit at sites where there are currently no Works Approval. Greater flexibility to establish low-cost, portable pumping facilities would benefit cultural outcomes. It is emphasized that any such works need to be low-cost consistent with the non-commercial benefit obtained.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments for consideration.



Fin Martin  
Manager Land Services