River Red Gum Forests Investigation

INFORMATION SHEET

Environmental water

Commonwealth and State governments, the Murray Darling Basin Commission, CSIRO and concerned scientists, farmers, and individuals have expressed concern about the environmental degradation of the Murray-Darling system. This impact is compounded by the effects of climate change and the past 10 years of drought. One of the key mechanisms available to arrest degradation is the allocation of water to the environment.

Healthy Red Gum forests and associated ecosystems depend on environmental water. These riverine ecosystems cover approx 190 000 hectares of public land; approximately a fifth of this is easily watered. The extent to which the remainder can be sustained will depend on future environmental watering. Some ecosystems such as the Black Box - Chenopod woodlands in the far west are likely to be difficult to water and are under more immediate threat.

Currently the commitments to provide environmental water annually to riverine ecosystems consists of: 500 gigalitres (Living Murray First Step Decision); 100 gigalitres (Barmah-Millewa); and 27.6 gigalitres (riverine wetlands). However, such volumes are not available to be allocated in dry years and are inadequate to sustain floodplain ecosystems.

Recent scientific reports have highlighted the grim situation facing the Murray-Darling river systems. A survey by Monash scientists commissioned by the catchment management authorities in north-west Victoria indicate that 75 percent of Red Gum forests on the River Murray floodplain are under stress due to inadequate watering. The recently published audit of river health in the 23 river valleys of the Murray Darling Basin shows all eleven rivers in the investigation area to be in poor to very poor condition.

VEAC has recommended that environmental watering of the floodplain through relevant existing state and national water programs take into account newly compiled information on water requirements – including the approximate frequency and extent of flooding – to sustain the flood-dependent natural ecosystems of the region. VEAC has changed its Draft Proposals which focussed on an estimated volume required to achieve adequate flooding (in the order of 4000 gigalitres every five years) via overbank flooding.

The recommendations provide flexibility to take into account the impacts of climate change and are in keeping with State and Commonwealth Government announcements – regarding water savings and water to be purchased – for allocation to the environment:

- the Victorian Government announced the return of 75 gigalitres to the environment from the FoodBowl modernisation project Stage One and potentially the return a further 100 gigalitres from the foreshadowed Stage Two.
- the Commonwealth Government has recently announced its 'Restoring the Balance in the Murray Darling Basin' program that will allocate $3 billion for purchasing back water rights from farmers to return water to the environment over the next 10 years.

Where overbank flows are not feasible, targeted works will be required to provide water to protect natural values on the floodplain.

VEAC's socio-economic analysis, based on public surveys, show that there is a net economic benefit to Victoria of $107 million per annum if adequate watering is provided to maintain riverine ecosystems, and $37 million per annum without additional water. This does not take

into account the cost of additional environmental water, but recognises that both State and Commonwealth governments have committed to the provision of additional environmental water for the Murray-Darling system.

VEAC has mapped and documented the flood-dependent natural values of the investigation area in detail and ascribed a watering frequency (minimum frequency and duration) for their maintenance in an ecologically healthy state. This project is described in appendix 11 of the Final Report and more fully on VEAC's website (www.veac.vic.gov.au).