

# Healthy Waterways Strategy Mid-term Review

## Summary



**Healthy Waterways  
Strategy 2018-2028**

Port Phillip & Westernport, Victoria

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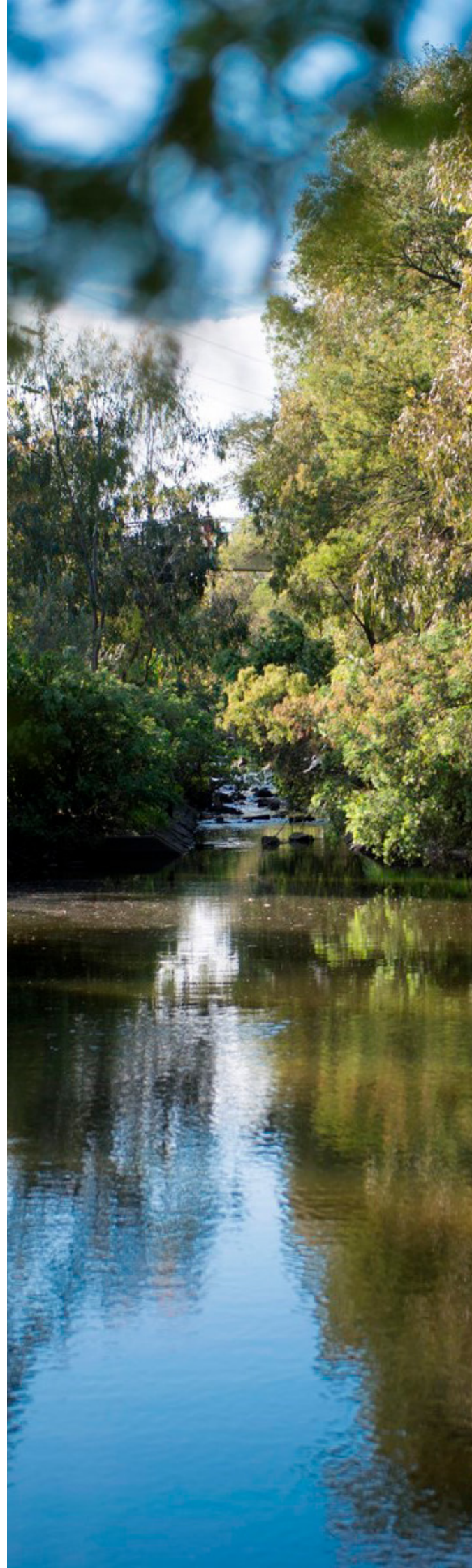
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This document provides a snapshot of the *Healthy Waterways Strategy* mid-term review and an overview of findings, recommendations and next steps. It is designed to support discussion with delivery partners and the development of a formal response.



## Acknowledgement of Country

The rivers, wetlands and estuaries in the region covered by the Healthy Waterways Strategy is the Country of the Bunurong, Gunaikurnai, Taungurung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples. They have lived in and been connected to the land, water, plants, and animals of this area for many thousands of years, and we offer our respect to their Elders past and present.



# Healthy Waterways Strategy – The story so far

Our rivers, creeks, wetlands, floodplains, estuaries and bays are shared places of significance for Victoria’s economic prosperity, Traditional Owners, local communities and biodiversity. These places make up our complex and interconnected regional waterway system and collectively are of immense value. This Healthy Waterways Strategy recognises and embraces the complexity of regional waterway systems and waterway management.

*Healthy Waterways Strategy 2018-2028*

## 50 YEAR VISION

Healthy and valued waterways are integrated with the broader landscape, and enhance life and liveability. Waterways connect diverse and thriving communities of plants and animals; provide amenity to urban and rural areas, and engage communities with their environment; and are managed sustainably to enhance environmental, economic, social and cultural values.

The [Healthy Waterways Strategy 2018-2028](#) establishes a region-wide plan to protect and improve the health of rivers, wetlands and estuaries across the Port Phillip and Westernport catchment. It reflects the aspirations and expectations of communities and stakeholders, statutory obligations and the desire to achieve long-term protection and enhancement of the region’s waterways.

The Strategy was co-designed by over 600 people and 220 organisations involved in waterway management including Traditional Owners, state agencies and local governments, water corporations, performance objectives and long-term targets (10 to 50 years).

### Protecting waterway values and conditions

The Strategy considers the health of waterways using a framework of *waterway values* and *waterway conditions*.

*Waterway values* are the things that people consider to be beneficial about waterways. They are important because they represent the reasons why people want to protect and improve waterway health. Waterways support a range of environmental, social, cultural and economic values.



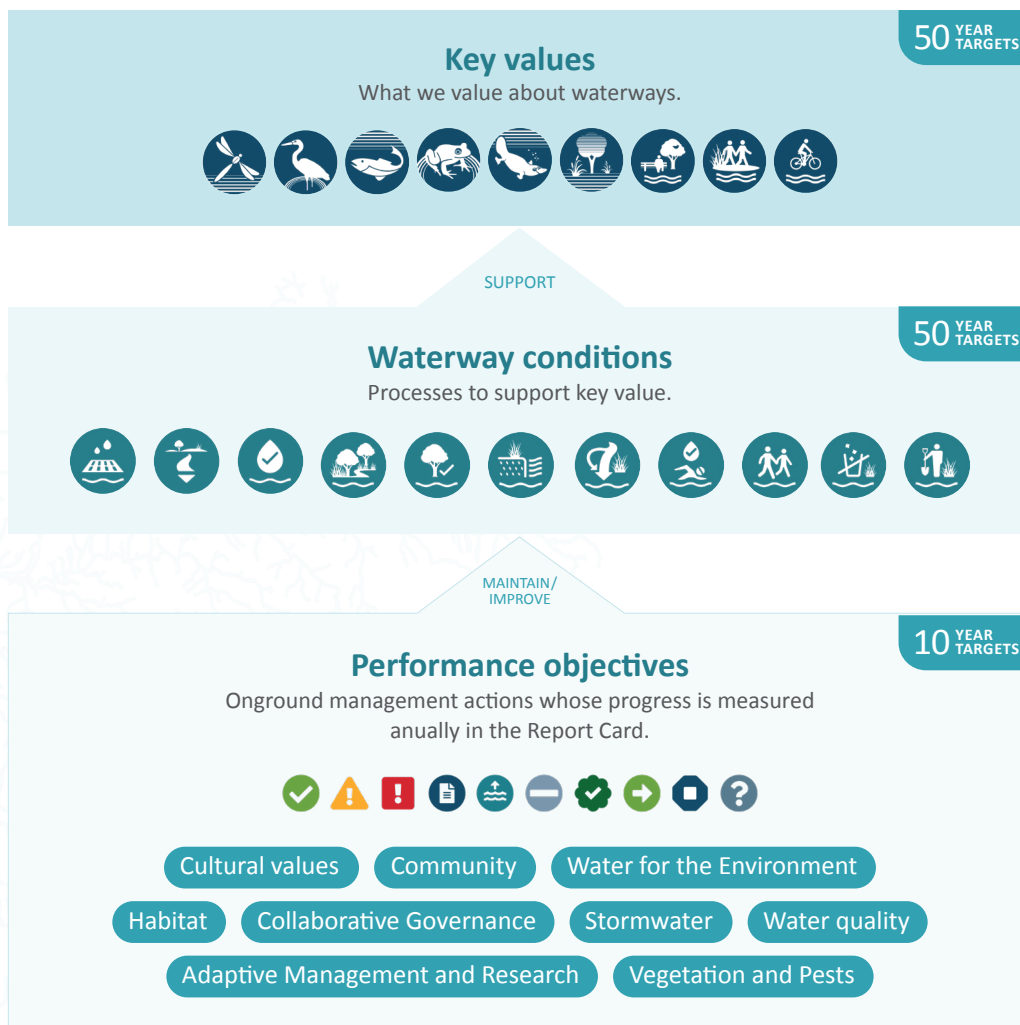
A subset of nine 'key' waterway values representative of a broader suite of values were chosen because of their importance to the community and ability to indicate how waterway health is tracking.

*Waterway conditions* refers to the state of physical aspects of the waterway and the processes that underpin healthy waterway ecosystems and values (e.g. bank vegetation and water quality). Improving waterway conditions supports higher waterway values.

*Threats* are negative factors that can have an impact on waterway conditions and waterway values. The Healthy Waterway Strategy identified urban growth and climate change as the two key threats that will significantly impact waterway health across the region over the next 50+ years. A range of data, models, tools and expert input were used to predict how waterway values would be affected by these threats. The Strategy aims to harness collective action (co-delivery) to mitigate the impacts of these threats, prevent declines and meet community and stakeholder expectations.

Long term *targets* were set for waterway values, and waterway conditions. 10-year sub-catchment and regional *Performance Objectives* were established to guide the necessary on-ground actions, initiatives and collaborations that progress towards the long-term targets. Performance Objectives cover themes such as stormwater, vegetation and pests, water quality, water for the environment, cultural and social values.

## Core components of the Strategy



## Strategy monitoring and evaluation

In 2019, monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) processes were established, providing a framework for tracking Strategy progress and ensuring continuous improvement and learning – including annual reporting and the need for a mid-term review.

The MERI outlines monitoring and reporting requirements for all Strategy targets (*waterway values* and *waterway conditions*), as well as the key evaluation questions that will be addressed during strategy review periods. It includes Monitoring and Evaluation Plans (MEPs) for rivers, estuaries, and wetlands to support evaluation of the Healthy Waterways Strategy.

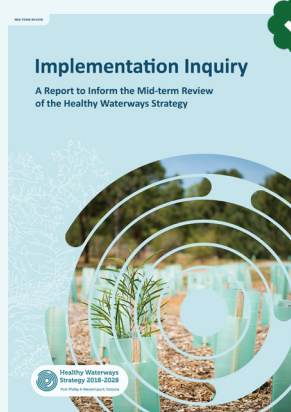
## Mid-term review

The mid-term review commenced in 2022, assessing progress of the Strategy and identifying areas for improvement. It also looked at how external influences have changed since 2018 such as climate forecasts and new policies / guidelines, and how these changes may impact the ability to meet Strategy targets.

### The Mid-term Review comprises



A **Science Inquiry** to assess changes to the trajectory of key values across the region, the state of current threats to waterway conditions and knowledge gaps.



An **Implementation Inquiry** to assess progress and evaluate factors influencing implementation of the Strategy and the likelihood of meeting 10-year Performance Objective targets.



A formal '**response**' developed in collaboration with delivery partners that outlines adjustments to implementation of the Healthy Waterways Strategy for 2024-2028 and beyond.

An independent Evaluation Panel was established to guide the review process and oversee development of the Science and Implementation Inquiry reports. The Panel of waterway management experts led an evidence-based process, ensuring findings were robust and credible, in line with best practise evaluation. The Panel also provided an independent lens to prioritising recommendations.

While each inquiry had a specific focus, the Science Inquiry was conducted first and informed aspects of the Implementation Inquiry. For example, information about threats to waterway values identified in the Science Inquiry helped identify and prioritise high-risk sub-catchments requiring re-focused effort over the next few years to meet Performance Objectives.

Several key themes also emerged from the Science Inquiry that were further explored by the Implementation Inquiry, namely:

- Environmental impacts of increased impervious surfaces created from fast urban development, and the critical importance of meeting stormwater Performance Objectives.
- Long-term predicted **climate change** impacts on environmental conditions and values and what this means for the different Performance Objectives and focus areas.
- Declining water availability and the need to better understand the level of impact and what this means for the **water for the environment** Performance Objectives.

## Recommendations

The Science Inquiry and Implementation Inquiry identified a number of recommendations which have been grouped into the following themes:

- 1 Refocus Effort** in critical areas
- 2 Reinvigorate Co-delivery** between strategy partners
- 3 Enable Traditional Owner-led** input to review processes and implementation
- 4 Accelerate delivery of Stormwater and Pollution Management** targets
- 5 Improve protection of Natural Wetlands and Headwater Streams**
- 6 Coordinate efforts across agencies to deliver Water for the Environment**
- 7 Find new ways of working with private landholders on Vegetation Management and Deer Control**
- 8 Expand understanding, assessment and improvement of Social Values**
- 9 Continue to improve Monitoring and Evaluation**

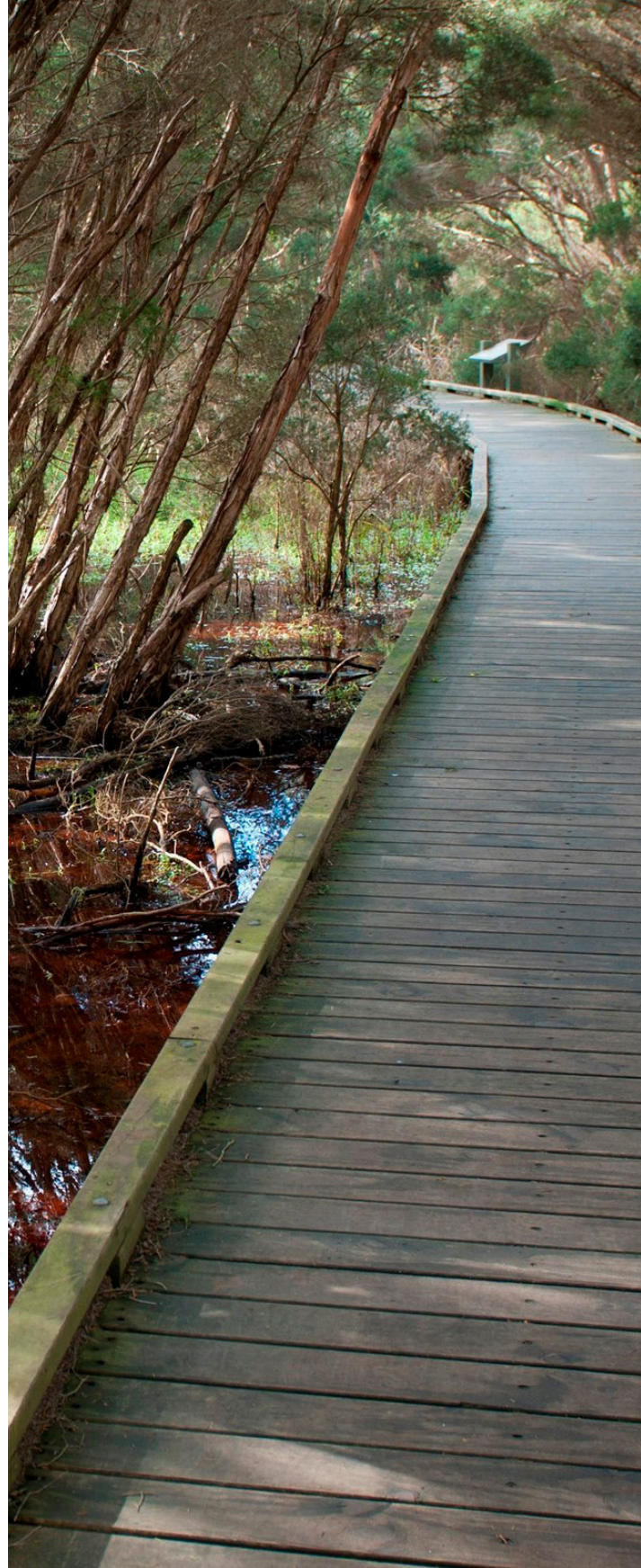
Detailed findings and recommendations can be found in the Science Inquiry and Implementation Inquiry Reports.

## Next Steps


Over the coming months, Melbourne Water and the Region-wide Leadership Group\* will host a series of forums to share findings and recommendations from the mid-term review and work with delivery partners to develop a response to the recommendations.

These forums are an opportunity for agency and community delivery partners to work together to re-assess where we collectively need to focus effort and what work needs to be prioritised, as well as consider new ways of achieving Strategy targets and Performance Objectives over the period 2024-28 and beyond.

*\*The Region-wide Leadership Group comprises key agency delivery partner representatives and is responsible for overseeing the Healthy Waterways Strategy.*







# Themes, findings and recommendations from the mid-term review

Specific findings and recommendations can be found in the Science Inquiry Report [code S] and Implementation Inquiry Report [code I]. e.g. S-1.1 refers to the Science Inquiry Report, recommendation 1.1

# 1 Refocus Effort in Critical Areas

## Findings

The mid-term review assessed the current Performance Objectives as sound and acknowledged the Healthy Waterways Strategy is making good progress in some areas. However, implementation is significantly off-track in others and requires refocused effort. The Science Inquiry and Implementation Inquiry have identified focus sub-catchments to guide collective effort and investment over the next five years, recognising there are constraints and limitations to delivering on all findings and recommendations across the region.

For example, rapid urban growth is leading to increased stream degradation and loss of natural wetlands (as identified in the Science Inquiry). Additionally, updated climate change modelling shows a greater potential threat than was predicted in 2018. Refocused effort around the Healthy Waterways Strategy Performance Objectives particularly for Stormwater, Natural Wetland protection and Water for the Environment is urgently required.

## Recommendations at a glance

- Accelerate efforts in focus sub-catchments and wetlands. (S-4.1, S-4.2, I-1.1)
- Align effort at all levels of management to overcome barriers to the challenging but critical, areas of Stormwater (including natural wetland protection), Water for the Environment and Vegetation. (I-1.2)
- Prioritise interventions that have immediate outcomes (e.g. fishways for Lang Lang and Lower Werribee River and stormwater infiltration). (S-5.2, S-6.2, S-6.3, S-7.1, I-1.3)
- Consider recognising efforts outside Performance Objective priority areas. (I-1.4)
- Ensure adequate guidance is in place. (S-5.1, S-6.4, S-13.3, S-14.7, I-1.5)
- Progress the integration of new knowledge to support implementation. (S-12.4, I-9.2)



### Findings

Support for the Strategy vision, targets and science remains strong across the delivery partners, including the desire to co-deliver with multiple collaborative projects underway that are contributing to the implementation of the Strategy. However, co-delivery is not being achieved to the extent intended, with limited evidence of any 'step-change' at a whole-of-Strategy scale. The mid-term review identified the need for Melbourne Water to strengthen its role as Strategy Lead, working with the Region-wide Leadership Group and delivery partners to deliver targeted initiatives focused on engagement, co-planning and co-delivery of the Healthy Waterways Strategy.

### Recommendations at a glance

- Strengthen alignment across delivery partners, plans and strategies. (I-2.1)
- Clarify accountabilities with partners to progress critical Performance Objectives (e.g. Water for the Environment and Stormwater). (I-2.2)
- Collaborate across multiple scales and focus on at risk Performance Objectives and complex region-wide issues. (I-2.3, I-2.4, I-4.8)
- Celebrate leaders and embed a culture of knowledge sharing, collaboration and learning. (I-2.5, I-2.6)
- Improve and streamline Melbourne Water systems and processes to drive co-delivery. (I-2.7)



**Traditional Owners have lived in this region for tens of thousands of years and have connections with the landscape and waterways through significant places, artefacts, language, stories and traditions.**

The Healthy Waterways Strategy commits to working with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians to protect and promote their cultural and historical connections with waterways. It also aims to protect the environmental values (land, water, vegetation and wildlife) which underpin these connections and share knowledge and understanding about waterways and their catchments.

The assessment of the Healthy Waterways Strategy's progress towards cultural values objectives will be completed by Traditional Owners through a separate process which will reflect on the past five years through the projects implemented and the context of changed policy around water and Traditional Owners - notably [Water is Life](#), the [Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo](#) (Yarra Strategic Plan), [Waterways of the West Action Plan](#), and [Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy](#).

This process aims to develop a path forward, supporting self-determination over the next four years of the Strategy and beyond.

The mid-term review provides a platform to progress this outside the Implementation Inquiry, Science Inquiry and formal response.

## Recommendations

- Understand the aspirations and expectations of Traditional Owners in the protection and management of waterways as part of implementing and evaluating the Healthy Waterways Strategy and Water is Life (e.g. evaluation of cultural Performance Objectives and identification of appropriate indicators). [\(I-3\)](#)
- Collectively support Traditional Owners in their work to assess the health of Country and, where Traditional Owners deem is appropriate, integrate this knowledge into end of Healthy Waterways Strategy evaluation process and continued implementation of the Strategy. [\(S-3.1\)](#)



## Findings

Since 2018, urban development has led to an estimated 1,700 hectares of additional impervious surfaces (which is more than 50% of the total expected by 2028). This increase is predicted to contribute to the decline of macroinvertebrates in at least 12 sub-catchments. Protecting waterways from the impacts of stormwater requires new approaches to urban planning and construction that reflect the latest knowledge, guidelines and practice standards. Managing pollution sources such as sediment and pesticide run-off from construction and impacts from industrial areas also needs to be addressed to maintain good quality water.

Changes to stormwater guidance in recent years provide the foundations for progressing stormwater performance objectives, however works are yet to be substantially realised on-ground. The issue of stormwater management is complex and must involve multiple organisations and industries to drive meaningful change. Healthy Waterways Strategy Partners, including Melbourne Water must urgently work together to prevent waterway degradation from urban development by accelerating on-ground outcomes to achieve stormwater targets and deliver on existing commitments.

## Recommendations at a glance

- Clarify roles and responsibilities within Melbourne Water and across delivery partners for stormwater harvesting and infiltration. (I-5.5)
- Clarify implementation pathways for the new EPA stormwater guidance. (S-13.1, I-5.5, I-5.7)
- Build industry capacity for managing stormwater volumes. (I-5.8)
- Take an 'action learning' approach to accelerate infiltration and harvesting projects. (I-5.1, I-5.2, I-5.3)
- Increase coordination across aligned plans (e.g. Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy and Integrated Waterway Management Catchment Plans). (I-5.4, I-5.6)
- Reduce the impacts of contaminant from key activities (e.g. improve control measures for industrial areas and construction phases). (S-12.2, S-12.3, S-12.4, S-12.5, I-6.1, I-6.2, I-6.3, I-6.5, I-6.6)



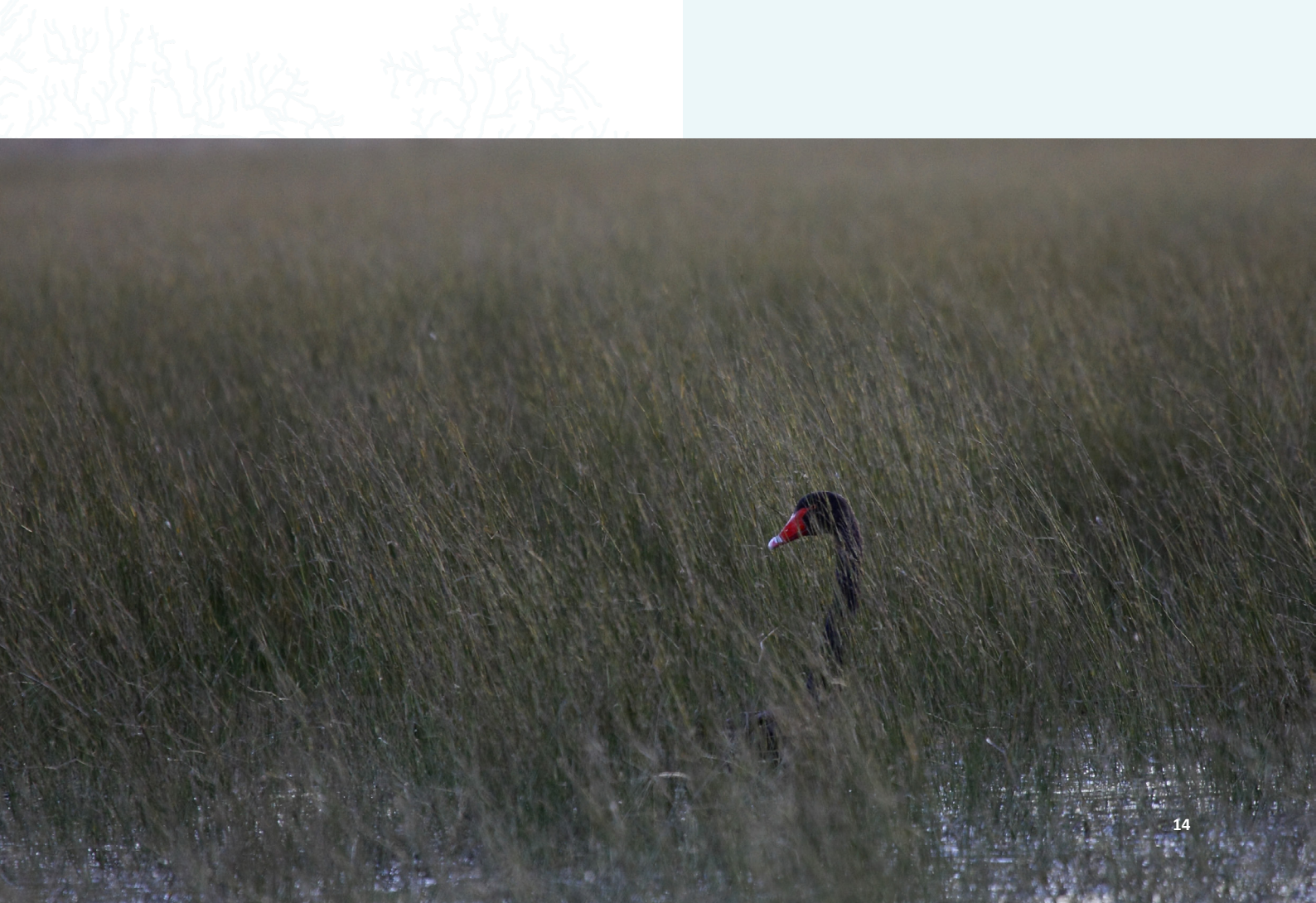
### Findings

The Healthy Waterways Strategy marks a significant improvement in how natural wetlands have been planned for and managed, with specific Performance Objectives set for a range of natural wetlands in the region. Despite this, several important natural wetlands have been lost due to urbanisation. Headwater streams have also been more clearly recognised in the Strategy for their importance in the overall waterway network but are equally threatened by urban development.

In response to the first [Healthy Waterways Strategy Annual Report](#) (2020), which reported natural wetlands as lost or under imminent threat, the Region-wide Leadership Group requested a discussion paper articulating the problem, the policy and planning context, and options for improved management. However, five natural wetlands have effectively been lost to urban development since 2018. While delivery partners strive to improve protection of natural wetlands and headwater streams, the rate of loss continues (14 natural wetlands are currently under imminent threat), and urgent effort is required to address this.

### Recommendations at a glance

- Investigate and implement new options to protect wetlands and headwater streams under imminent threat from urban development. ([S-14.2](#), [S-14.6](#), [S-14.7](#), [I-7.1](#), [I-7.4](#))
- Strengthen wording of relevant Performance Objectives to promote better protection of wetlands. ([S-14.1](#), [I-7.2](#))
- Increase adoption and use of updated mapping of wetlands and headwater streams for planning. ([S-14.3](#), [S-14.4](#), [I-7.3](#), [I-7.6](#))
- Improve policies and planning frameworks through the next Victorian Waterway Management Strategy. ([S-14.5](#), [I-7.5](#))



### Findings

There is an urgent need to progress environmental water recovery and improve outcomes in regulated and unregulated systems. However, managing competing water needs is a complex issue, especially in a drying climate. The mid-term review found some declines in waterway values are likely to be linked to declining water availability and despite efforts, little progress has been made to date in achieving water recovery targets set in the Strategy.

Many initiatives are underway, however greater commitment to securing appropriate environmental flows across both regulated and unregulated systems is required. Strategies and plans such as [Central and Gippsland Region Sustainable Water Strategy](#) and [Catchment Scale Integrated Water Management Plans](#) support the need for increased water for the environment and offer an opportunity to collaborate on delivering on-ground outcomes.

### Recommendations at a glance

- Prioritise securing an environmental water entitlement for the Maribyrnong River catchment. [\(I-4.1\)](#)
- Increase of the substitution of manufactured water to drive water recovery across all catchments (e.g. use of harvested stormwater and desalination instead of diversion from waterways). [\(S-4.1, I-1.2, I-4.3, I-4.4\)](#)
- Ensure environmental water representatives are more involved in water resource planning. [\(I-4.2\)](#)
- Improve consistency between Melbourne Water and Southern Rural Water in the use of existing flow protection mechanisms (e.g. metering, bans and rosters, etc.). [\(I-4.5, I-4.6\)](#)
- Explore and implement new approaches for managing stream flow in response to updated climate projections (e.g. farm dam management). [\(S-11.1, I-4.7\)](#)



## Find new ways of working with private landholders on **Vegetation Management and Deer Control**

### Findings

Working with private landowners is critical to achieving Healthy Waterway Strategy outcomes, particularly along waterway frontages in focus sub-catchments where vegetation establishment targets are significantly off-track. There is a need to increase investment and engagement with private landowners and establish new approaches that support integrated catchment and waterway management outcomes. Deer have been identified as an increasing threat to vegetation. Deer management in remote forested areas has also been identified as particularly challenging.

Delivery partners (including landowners) need to work together, to coordinate efforts to protect high quality vegetation sites.

### Recommendations at a glance

- Find new ways of engaging with private landowners and overcoming barriers to improving waterway vegetation (e.g. working together on vegetation management and deer control). [\(I-8.1, I-8.2, I-8.3\)](#)
- Increase coordinated, broad-scale, multi-agency approaches for working in remote areas. [\(S-6.1, I-9.1, I-9.3, I-9.4\)](#)
- Improve reporting on works funded from outside Melbourne Water. [\(I-8.4\)](#)





## Findings

Supporting the social values of waterways is increasingly recognised as an important component of waterway management. Community expectations around access to greenspace and the ability to connect with nature through recreation or volunteering has grown in recent years recognising the mental health and wellbeing benefits it can provide. Connecting with nature is also known to increase community awareness, appreciation and action to protect environmental values. The presence of litter impacts the value of a waterway from an environmental and social perspective and is seen by the community as a key threat to waterway health. Litter management is complex because it requires multi-agency interventions and coordination. While there is consensus on the importance of litter management, a commitment to action is required.

## Recommendations at a glance

- Progress the social values framework and ensure wetlands are adequately recognised. (S-10.1, I-10.3)
- Improve the ability to evaluate progress towards social value outcomes. (S-10.3, S-10.5)
- Improve waterway access in focus sub-catchments. (S-10.2, I-10.2)
- Support community group participation in waterway management. (I-10.1)
- Prioritise areas for litter management by expanding the new litter monitoring method and progressing the development of solutions. (S-10.4, I-11.1, I-11.2, I-11.3)
- Continue to investigate recreational water quality risks. (I-6.4)



### Findings

This is the first time a comprehensive mid-term review of the Healthy Waterways Strategy has been conducted. The ability to undertake this review has relied on data collected through improved annual reporting, monitoring programs and external evaluation. Being able to track and evaluate the Strategy's progress is important to ensure changes and improvements can be implemented efficiently and in a timely manner. While enhancements to monitoring and reporting programs have been made, there is a need to ensure continuous improvement and that remaining gaps are addressed, and data management system continue to develop.

### Recommendations at a glance

- Continue to improve data capture and management systems. (I-12.1)
- Update specific targets identified through this mid-term review. (S-7.2, S-8.3, S-9.1, S-14.1, I-7.2, I-12.3)
- Address knowledge gaps and improve monitoring and evaluation methods to inform final review process. (S-1.1, S-8.1, S-8.2, S-11.1, S-12.1, S-14.8, I-6.6, I-12.4, I-12.5)
- Prioritise and address research knowledge gaps. (S-2.1, I-12.2)





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## More Information

Healthy Waterways Strategy

[Access the Implementation Inquiry Report >>](#)

[Access the Science Inquiry Report >>](#)

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