



Tracking progress through the 2021-22 Annual Report

Each year Catchment Management Authorities report on the condition of the region's environment through their Annual Reports against Water; Land; Biodiversity; Community; and Integrated Catchment Management themes.

The Catchment Condition section of the Annual Report reflects on the likely impact of annual scale actions, events and observed change within the previous year, and over the previous three years. A key purpose of monitoring changes in the operating context is to help identify opportunities for adapting and changing the way we manage the environment.

The Catchment Condition report is structured in line with the statewide outcomes framework that align with regional outcomes sought by catchment communities, to the high-level policy outcomes of the Victorian and Australian Government. These statewide and policy outcomes are key components of the North Central Regional Catchment Strategy and one way to track RCS implementation and aspirations.

For the 2021-22 reporting year, the following case studies supported the overall assessment for each theme with links in the Annual Report pointing to the North Central Regional Catchment Strategy – Tracking progress RCS webpage.

Water & Integrated Catchment Management ***A Healthy Coliban Catchment***

During the reporting period, the Healthy Coliban Catchment project flourished with strengthened working relationships between project partners North Central CMA, Coliban Water and Djandak. This is result of regular Technical Working Group meetings, Coliban Water Board tour of project sites and regular informal communication with partners regarding project progress.

Djandak had greater, more meaningful involvement in the project, through the employment of two part-time project staff, Djaara women Jess Donaczy and Kayla Baksh. Jess and Kayla worked alongside North Central CMA staff, completing regular Waterwatch monitoring, developing revegetation species lists, coordinating a Healing Country event for Djaara and planning the field work for an Aboriginal Waterway Assessment. They were also involved in the three Community Reference Group (CRG) meetings held during the year. Activities were an opportunity for landholders and other agency staff to visit project sites, share knowledge and ideas relevant to the project.

A highlight was the June 2022 CRG field trip, where the group, including community members, Landcare, Djandak and Macedon Ranges Shire staff. visited two project sites.

Trentham Golf Club president Geoff Durham led the group to Stony Creek (beside the 13th tee), a Coliban River tributary.

Through the project, the site was transformed from a weed infested eyesore to an attractive asset. While only a small site, the goodwill generated is invaluable with Geoff championing the project in the Trentham community.

John Walter (Malmsbury Landcare) also shared his local knowledge and passion about the geologically and culturally significant tachylite deposits around the Upper Coliban Reservoir. This glassy rock flakes easily and is highly valued by the local Dja Dja Wurrung mob Gulk Gulk Gundidj ('belonging to the forest').

Key onground project achievements during 2021-22 included establishing 11 new On-Ground Works Agreements and installing 6.6km of fencing, 13 off-stream systems, 27ha of woody weed control and 3.8ha of revegetation.

These works were delivered by Djandak and local contractors. Some delays were experienced with COVID-19 restrictions and the availability of contractors with sickness/leave; however, all output targets were achieved (with the exception of revegetation).

The positive experience of participating landholders was captured in two Story of Change videos promoted on Facebook and the project pages of North Central CMA and Coliban Water websites.

Participant quotes:

"We want to leave a legacy here. We want to set something up so it will continue and benefit the broader environment when we leave" Madeleine Jenkins, Tylden.

"It was easy to work up a plan to do it (willow control) all at once, because there's not much point in small blocks doing works without their neighbours doing works as well" Shaunna O'Grady, Drummond.

Greater community awareness of the project is expected with the production of farm gate signage for participating landholders.

The program is delivered by Macedon Ranges Shire Council with financial and in-kind support from the Healthy Coliban Catchment project, Hepburn Shire and City of Greater Bendigo, DJPR and Melbourne Water.

Land

Loddon Campaspe Irrigation Region, Land Water Management Plan implementation: increasing irrigation efficiency

The North Central CMA's Healthy Productive Irrigated Landscapes (HPIL) program has been working in partnership with Agriculture Victoria to work with key partners and community in the Loddon Campaspe Irrigation region. There has been an upheaval across the irrigation operating environment over the past two decades. Nowadays, a large portion of irrigators are heavily reliant on the water allocation market.

The focus of this pilot project was to provide the best possible information on the current irrigation supply volume, and the range of factors affecting Upcoming Irrigation Water Availability (UIWA). Information was provided from a range of existing resources, pulled together in one

place which provided an interpretation, improved format, and a context that was tailored and practical for irrigators.

This pilot service was evaluated using an online survey of subscribers in November 2021. A total of 78 respondents out of 650 subscribers. Over half (58%) of the respondents were irrigators. 8.1 (out of 10) respondents said the information provided was valuable. 7.4/10 said regular updates helped reduce uncertainty about irrigation water availability and 7.1/10 said it assisted with earlier and more informed farm management decision making, indicating the services helped them better understand different components of southern Basin irrigation water availability.

Irrigators said they used information in the UIWA updates in farm decision making in various ways and were able to make earlier decisions, to break down big farm management decisions into smaller, easier ones, while more options were available earlier in the season.

“A fantastic resource and service that is practical and useful in our irrigation business. It is welcoming to receive such timely information to assist with management in our irrigation business helping us to reduce water use, increase yields and harvest greater profits. Well done!”

The UIWA service contributes to the SIP Medium-Term Outcome (MTO) 1 ‘Irrigators are supported to make timely and informed decisions’ with improvements in wise water use, and increased ability to adapt to variable climate conditions and reduced water availability.

The UIWA service also contributes to ‘Rural water policy is responsive to emerging issues’ by collaborating with a range of local, state, and federal agencies to enhance two-way communication and improve information supplied to irrigation communities, which is a valuable role of government.

Biodiversity

Plains for Wanderer

The plains-wanderer is a small, cryptic, ground-dwelling bird that predominately occurs in semi-arid, tussock-forming native grasslands in south-eastern Australia. The species was listed as Critically Endangered in 2015 under the *EPBC Act 1999*, and, in 2019, ranked as the number one bird species in the world for conservation action based on its taxonomic distinctness and high risk of extinction.

The Northern Plains Grasslands of Victoria are one of the last remaining strongholds for the species. The Plains-wanderer is a flagship for the conservation of native grasslands in this region, and community groups and conservation organisations are acting to save the bird and its habitat. They are also ranked number one priority for conservation action among birds of the world by the Zoological Society of London.

But a recent survey in northern Victoria has uncovered a record number of the small, quail-like birds.

“We detected 60 adults and 41 chicks. This is more than double the previous best result in 2018 when 30 adults and 17 chicks were detected,” says Dan Nugent, a PhD student at La Trobe University.

In fact, this is the biggest count of plains-wanderers in Victoria’s Northern Plains since monitoring began back in 2010.

“A further encouraging sign was that 85 per cent of monitoring sites supported plains-wanderers – the highest percentage of sites since surveys began,” says Dan.

While improvements in technology and survey methods over the years could contribute to the higher survey numbers, the growth in population is likely the result of both human and non-human intervention, says North Central CMA project manager, Laura Chant.

“The La Nina climate cycle facilitated a wide-spread and prolonged breeding event, which is likely to have boosted their numbers,” Laura says.

“Also, it’s highly likely the habitat management and protection measures we, and several partner organisations, have taken over many years to protect this incredible bird are proving to be highly effective – including conservation covenants and strategic grazing of conservation reserves.” But while the latest survey results are celebrated, Dan says conservationists remain extremely concerned for the future of plains-wanderers.

“In Victoria, habitat loss driven by conversion of native grasslands to croplands is a major threat.

“With so little habitat remaining, the population will continue to be vulnerable; fox predation may also be a threatening process but remains a knowledge gap.”

Community River Detectives

The River Detective program is a foundation project that connects youth to natural resource management through education and hands-on activities such as water quality testing.

The success of the “Going with the Flow” event in June 2022 is testament to the program’s popularity and importance.

On June 8 2022, more than 100 River Detectives students braved the winter sunshine for a fun-filled day of discovery at Tree Tops Scout Camp in Gunbower Forest. Students from St Joseph’s Kerang, Gunbower, Leitchville and Koondrook primary schools were welcomed to Country by a smoking ceremony by Barapa Barapa Elder Uncle Ron Galway before being treated to hands-on activities to learn more about water for the environment on the Gunbower Forest floodplain.

Highlights included live turtle and fish displays from Native Fish Australia and Turtles Australia, where children learnt all about the special critters that call Gunbower Forest home.

Parks Victoria staff lead an interactive waterbug activity. Students were very fortunate to also learn how to weave from Barapa Barapa woman Laura Kirby and to paint (and throw!) boomerangs with North Central CMA staff.

The North Central CMA would like to extend their gratitude to Uncle Ron Galway and Barapa Barapa Traditional Owners, Native Fish Australia, Parks Victoria, Turtles Australia, ceramicist Anne Ferguson and her assistant Kaori, as well as the Leitchville Bunyips Sporting Club. Partners and communities working together.

Clay fish and turtle creations produced by students on the day were on exhibition at the Gateway to Gannawarra Visitor Centre in Cohuna throughout July 2022 to celebrate the environmental watering of the Gunbower Forest floodplain over winter and spring.