

**Department of Sustainability &  
Environment, Victoria**

# **River Health Program Engagement Strategy**

## **Consultation Report**

Prepared by:

Econnect Communication Pty Ltd

(in association with Efect Pty Ltd)

PO Box 734

South Brisbane BC 4101

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# Overview of Project

## **Objective**

The objective of this project was to develop a strategic engagement plan for the River Health Program (RHP) within the Catchment and Water Services Division of the Department of Sustainability & Environment (DSE) in Victoria.

The engagement plan was to:

- position the RHP where it can be most effective in delivering its goals
- establish a profile for the RHP
- develop and maintain relationships in a partnership approach
- establish networks and mechanisms for communication

## About Engagement

Engagement is a two-way process between interested individuals, groups or organisations. It is generally undertaken to assist in achieving mutual goals. In the context of the RHP, engagement is essential to deliver the RHP's goals. The RHP is a small player in a crowded market working on or interested in river health – alone the RHP can achieve much – but in conjunction with effective engagement with partners, the RHP can do much more.

Engagement takes effort. Whilst the RHP team has built effective relationships with a number of partners, this Plan outlines an increased role for engagement by the Program. This may require new skills or new ways of doing business within the program. A key component of effective engagement is the ability to listen to another's needs, and to constructively work with them to develop an agreed way forward.

The Plan that follows outlines mechanisms for engagement to be adopted as “core business” of the RHP.

## **Process**

In recommending an engagement plan for the RHP, Econnect Communication undertook a listening exercise that included:

- discussions with the RHP team as a group along with some individual discussions around a set of core questions
- a focused discussion at the Waterway Managers' Forum
- phone and personal interviews with key influencers from Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs), Victorian Water Trust, other sections of the Department, the Minister's Office, the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), Environment Protection Agency, Victorian Farmers Federation, Environment Victoria, National Action Plan, Murray-Darling Basin Commission and Land & Water Australia
- a web survey of Waterwatch and Water Quality Coordinators

## **Results**

The results from all the data collected through discussions, interviews and the survey were analysed according to peoples' perceptions, concerns and needs. The results of the survey were also quantitatively analysed.

### **A Strong Foundation**

The RHP has a strong foundation in engagement. In particular:

- the Program's work is well recognised amongst a range of partners (though the program itself is not generally known as a discrete entity);
- river health is a key Victorian government and community priority (with an endorsed River Health Strategy);
- the RHP has good relationships with a number of partners (notably Catchment Management Authorities); and
- the RHP team is committed to engagement as a critical component of their work.

These views are supported by feedback from partners.

### **A Changing Environment**

The RHP operates in a changing environment. Previously, the RHP has focused on establishing a technical and strategic basis to river health in Victoria, and developing relationships with Catchment Management Authorities. This has allowed both the development and endorsement of a widely supported River Health Strategy, and the delivery of significant on-ground works in regional areas.

However, the changing environment for river health now involves:

- a stated and clear government commitment to river health;
- more players and influencers;
- more opportunities and risks (due to the increasing number of players and influencers); and
- a focus on implementation and outcomes (as opposed to methods and strategies).

In addition, and in part as a result of the work the RHP has undertaken, the Catchment Management Authorities are maturing in their understanding and approach to natural resource management generally, and river health specifically.

And finally, whilst technical and project related issues continue to be important to the work of the RHP, policy and engagement issues are now central to the effective delivery of RHP's goals.

### **Partners' response**

A summary of partners' response to the consultation is provided below.

#### **Catchment Management Authorities**

- They have matured in their understanding of river health compared to 5 years ago
- River health now seen as core business/fundamental, and most are satisfied with involvement and interaction with some RHP staff
- Call to streamline reporting and funding processes

- Concern about centralised bureaucracy and “silos” within DSE
- Would like more regional visits and activities with opportunities for staff to develop relationships at all levels
- The challenges for the RHP are to:
  - create positive relationships with all CMAs not just some
  - recognise the maturing state of CMAs and start to do business differently
  - back away from micro-managing CMAs and be more strategic (including reporting processes)
  - build on positive personal relationships with many CMAs
  - focus more on strategy and policy rather than project implementation
  - interact more with Board & CEOs

### **Waterway Managers**

- See RHP as very important
- Concerned about relationships with other parts of DSE and with DPI; thought RHP could play a coordinating role
- Want relevant information, informal interaction, Waterway Managers’ Forum continued, regional meetings
- Want information on emerging issues, national perspectives, priorities and processes
- Thought RHP could play a role in communicating re the Forum more widely within CMAs and DSE

### **Waterwatch and Water Quality Coordinators**

The survey results indicate that they:

- have moderate to low awareness and interaction with RHP
- are very supportive of the RHP, which is seen to be relevant and important
- want regular contact, face-to-face interaction, training/technical workshops, an opportunity to input, newsletter

### **Other parts of Department of Sustainability & Environment (DSE)**

People interviewed include representatives of the Executive, Strategic Policy Unit and other parts of the Water Sector division.

- Perceived internal relationships as critical to the success of the RHP
- Concerned about duplication of effort and the need for common approaches
- The RHP by itself will never be enough; it needs to find a way to integrate with other relevant programs and there is a desire for common approaches
- There are growing relationships with the Water Sector division that need to be further developed

- Some senior people may not necessarily be switched on to river health
- There is a desire for greater interaction that has a clear purpose and message

### **Victorian Water Trust (VWT)**

- RHP widely recognised and seen to be ahead of other sections within DSE with its methodologies and assessment tools, its involvement with VWT, and its delivery to external customers like the CMAs
- Perceived to be relatively isolated program with not much leverage or awareness within DSE
- RHP one of best with regards involvement with VWT funding, compared to other parts of DSE
- Want to see more on-ground outcomes from RHP related to their concern re value of investment in efforts
- Concern about how the RHP team refreshes themselves given that they have been doing the same thing for a long time
- Want more roundtable discussions about:
  - how to achieve river health outcomes
  - how VWT can assist RHP

### **Victorian Minister for Water & Environment**

- Has a need to demonstrate that the Government cares about river health and is fixing it
- Doesn't think the arguments have been well made about the need for and benefits of change, especially for rural communities - it's not good enough just to sell achievements if people don't understand why/benefits
- Perceives river health to be DSE's core business, although thinks engagement is department's "weak link"
- Concerned that RHP a winner but that the message is not getting out
- Minister is keen/focused/informed/media savvy/ willing to support efforts to raise awareness
- Minister wants to be involved in publicising successes (media, events, conferences etc)' otherwise only needs to be involved in policy challenges or issues, which need Ministerial intervention

### **Other State Government Departments**

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is very supportive of the RHP and keen to collaborate and partner with the Program at both regional and centre office levels. They do have a concern that the RHP lacks understanding about what they do.

The DPI wants to partner with RHP on areas of mutual interest, such as fisheries and water quality. However, they would prefer a joint approach with shared outcomes, rather than being consulted about almost-complete documents at the last minute. They want to

interact with the RHP at all levels, not just at head office and want this engagement to be formal as well as an informal. There was a perceived need to gain better clarity about each other's roles.

### **National organisations (National Action Plan/National Heritage Trust; Murray-Darling Basin Commission, Land & Water Australia)**

National organisations want to partner with the RHP and be involved in co-investment. They see interaction as largely strategic, but believe that the RHP is important for adding value to their own activities: "Victoria is leading in this area".

The national organisational representatives interviewed had a low awareness of what the RHP was doing specifically, and urged the Program to also consult with other people in their organisations (e.g. Brendan Edgar at Land & Water Australia).

Perceived barriers to engagement were time, lack of funds, poor communication and the differing approaches to river health assessment across organisations. The MDBIC, in particular, urged the RHP to use the Strategic Rivers Assessment (SRA) process. Land & Water Australia stressed the collaborative opportunities for research and knowledge exchange that could happen through Victoria joining the National Rivers Consortium. They were also concerned about a perceived arrogance by the Program thinking they did not need to consult with or collaborate with inter-State organisations.

## **NGOs**

### ***Victorian Farmers' Federation***

- Haven't heard anything since River Health Strategy released
- Want consistency with initiatives like The Living Murray
- If there are issues likely to affect farmers, then they want to know about them

### ***Environment Victoria (EV)***

- Personal interaction seen to be important in engagement
- There is a lack of trust in DSE, and to a lesser extent in the RHP, as perceived to be too close to water users creating a conflict of interest
- RHP perceived to fail to link with national initiatives
- Keen to be involved in joint activities
- Perception that RHP and EV are important to each other

## **Critical issues**

Five engagement issues have been identified as critical to the RHP's efforts:

1. Re-orientation
2. Roles
3. Relationships
4. Recognition
5. River health

These issues are described in detail below, while the recommended responses are included in the Draft Engagement Strategy, which follows.

### Issue 1: Re-orientation – doing business differently

There is a critical need for the RHP to do its business differently. This need is being driven by the drive internally to reduce duplication within the Department, be more efficient and integrate efforts across both strategies and divisions. There is increasing competition for funds and an increase in the drive towards accountability. Externally, RHP is also tainted by the perception of “silos” within DSE and other Departments such as DPI and EPA. CMAs and others are calling for a more holistic approach to natural resource management.

RHP’s relationship with CMAs also needs redefining. In general CMAs are maturing in their approach to river health issues. In addition, the RHP can no longer afford to continue to maintain a relatively “hands on” approach to their work with CMAs (though noting this has been essential in getting this far).

### Issue 2: Roles – clarifying and promoting

The roles of the RHP in developing the River Health Strategy, and in previous work on river health, are widely known. However, the role of the RHP in implementing the River Health Strategy, and more specifically, in the context of the changing environment within which the RHP now operates, need redefinition.

The roles of individual RHP team members need to be more closely aligned to that of the Program, with each team member adopting an increased focus on engagement.

As noted above, the role that RHP plays with CMAs as well as with the many other players in river health needs either re-defining or better definition.

### Issue 3: Relationships – formal and informal interaction

The RHP needs to interact with a range of partners with diverse needs. The RHP team needs to plan engagement as a core business activity and individuals need to build this into the work plans. All of those consulted expressed the need for personal interaction and ongoing formal and informal relationships at all levels. This change in business focus for the RHP may require training in engagement and communication skills.

### Issue 4: Recognition – raising awareness

While most of those consulted believe the RHP is important, there is a generally low awareness of the activities, and more importantly, the successes of the Program. In general, there is also low awareness of the RHP as a discrete entity, though there is widespread awareness of the general work DSE does on river health, and in particular the River Health Strategy. The brand “River Health Program” is not widely known.

### Issue 5: River health – achieving community understanding

There is generally poor community understanding, especially by rural communities, about river health. In particular, what it is, why it’s important and how it can be achieved to produce what benefits?

The following Engagement Strategy proposes responses to these critical issues.

# Engagement Strategy

## **Introduction**

The Strategy which follows is based on a seven-step approach:

1. Objectives – what the RHP wants to achieve with engagement
2. Partners – who the RHP wants to engage with
3. Relationships – the relationships that the RHP wants with these partners
4. Messages – the core messages that the RHP wants to communicate during engagement
5. Activities – the engagement activities
6. Evaluation – how engagement activities will be evaluated
7. Action Plan – taking responsibility and providing resources to make it happen

This Strategy recognises that engagement is a fundamental part of the way the River Health Program does business. It is based on the following principles about how the RHP operates to:

- promote the whole program rather than individual elements of that program
- build engagement and communication activities into the roles of all staff
- maximise face-to-face personal communication
- use informal communication methods as much as possible
- add value to other relevant initiatives through collaborative partnerships
- focus on policy challenges
- reduce its hands-on technical involvement with CMA projects

## **1. Objectives**

The objectives address the five critical issues identified during consultation:

1. To re-orientate the core business of the RHP towards increased engagement and integration
2. To redefine and promote the role of the RHP
3. To build relationships with all partners that are personal as well as bureaucratic
4. To promote the activities and achievements of the RHP
5. To explain the importance of river health to the wider community

## **2. Partners**

The RHP wishes to engage with the following partners:

- Internal – within the RHP team
- Other parts of DSE – other parts of the Water Sector division, Public Lands, Stewardship & Biodiversity, Strategic Policy unit, Executive, Corporate Communication & Stakeholder Management, Victorian Water Trust
- The Minister responsible for the Department
- CMAs – Chairs/CEOs, Waterway Managers, Waterwatch and Water Quality Coordinators

- Other State government departments (DPI, EPA)
- Relevant Federal Government initiatives (NHT/NAP, NCC, MDBC, Land & Water Australia)
- NGOs – Victorian Farmers Federation, Environment Victoria
- Urban and rural water authorities, local government?
- Irrigation industry
- Research agencies, such as the CRCs for Freshwater Ecology and Catchment Hydrology
- General public – rural and urban communities

### 3. Relationships

RHP will consider the perceptions, concerns and needs of its partners in deciding the relationships they wish to have with identified partners. This will include considering the level of involvement that the RHP wishes to have with its partners, which is indicated to some extent in the table above.

*Crucial to this step and subsequent steps in this Strategy will be filling the gaps in RHP's knowledge of the perceptions, concerns and needs of its partners (e.g. water authorities, irrigation industry, researchers, general public).*

To better understand partners, the key questions to answer about each partner are:

<b>Perceptions:</b>	What do they already know and understand about river health and the RHP?
<b>Concerns:</b>	What are their concerns about river health and the RHP?
<b>Communication needs:</b>	What information do they wish to know? How do they wish to be communicated with? How do they wish to interact with the RHP team? What assistance do they require to ensure they are informed and able to be involved?

### 4. Messages

To be effective, engagement with partners of the RHP needs to be underpinned by core messages. Based on feedback from a number of partners, suggested messages are:

- Rivers are a key government priority
- Rivers are about people, farms/industries, environment
- Why we should care about river health
- What the Victorian government is doing about river health
  - And why is that good?
- What are the technical issues surrounding river health:
  - Biophysical, social and economic dimensions
  - Benefits, costs and tradeoffs
  - Relationship of river health to other NRM/Water Sector issues in Victoria

## 5. Activities

The activities described below are in response to current knowledge about partners' perceptions, concerns and needs.

These activities need to be revisited and updated as more is found out about partners' perceptions, concerns and needs (step 3).

Objective	Activity	Partners	Priority
1. To re-orientate the core business of the RHP towards increased engagement and integration	Provide strategic and policy support to CMAs	CMAs: CEOs Project Officers Program Managers	High
	Identify emerging issues (e.g. from white paper) and communicate to partners	As above	High
	Brief other parts of DSE; share information (with clear purpose and messages)	Other sections of DSE	Medium
	Take a leading role in coordinating cross initiative interaction	DSE NAP/NHT DPI EPA MDBC Land & Water	High
2. To redefine and promote the role of the RHP	Clearly define roles within adaptive management cycle and promote roles of whole RHP as well as individuals within the team	Internal then promote to all partners	Very high
	Identify where RHP's role fits with other NRM initiatives	Other parts of DSE NHT/NAP MDBC DPI EPA	Medium
3. To build relationships with all partners that are personal as well as bureaucratic	Train RHP staff in engagement/communication skills	Internal	High
	Organise regional visits, tours, briefings	CMAs Minister Executive General public	High
	Organise and participate in social events with partners	Internal DSE NGOs	High
	Develop joint communication/engagement plans with regions	CMAs (for RHS)	High

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Partners</b>	<b>Priority</b>
	Find out more about partners' perceptions, concerns and communication/involvement needs (including people at different levels within organisations, especially national or other State organisations)	All partners	High
4. To promote the activities and achievements of the RHP	Design key messages for each partner group	All partners	Very high
	Develop a media strategy targeting Weekly Times, Herald Sun	General public Minister	High
	Place articles in relevant internal DSE publications	DSE	High
	Place articles in relevant external publications (including other organisations' newsletters)	External partners General public	Medium
	Organise Ministerial events/launches	Minister General public	High
	Conduct briefings	DSE CMAs	Medium (updating) to High (risk manage)
	Website	All	High
	Celebrate and communicate successes	All	High
	Identify 4-6 champions for RHP and ask them to proactively promote the Program	All	High
Disseminate a RHP e-newsletter on a monthly basis	Coordinators: Waterwatch, Water quality Waterways Other parts of DSE EPA DPI National initiatives	High	
5. To explain the importance of river health to the wider community	Clear explanations developed about river health and promoted (using activities outlined with Objective 4)	General public Minister	Very high

Objective	Activity	Partners	Priority
	Produce a page of key facts about river health and value of rivers to Victoria	General public	High
	Develop an alliance with Corporate and Ministerial communicators	Minister DSE General public	High
	Implement Waterwatch programs	Waterwatch coordinators General public	High
	Facilitate and coordinate access to knowledge and information (in association with Website)	All	High

## 6. Evaluation

Evaluation will be conducted regularly to determine the success level of various engagement activities. This will continue to inform and shape this Engagement Strategy. The objectives of the Strategy will be evaluated on a more formal basis at the end of every 12 months. The indicators and measures for evaluation are shown in the following table.

Objective	Indication of success	Evaluation methods
1. To re-orientate the core business of the RHP towards increased engagement and integration	Level of engagement Level of work with other parts of DSE and other relevant initiatives	Records of engagement Survey/phone questionnaire
2. To redefine and promote the role of the RHP	Level of awareness of RHP's role Degree of satisfaction with RHP's activities	Records of feedback Survey Phone questionnaire
3. To build relationships with all partners that are personal as well as bureaucratic	Level of engagement Degree of satisfaction with interactions with RHP	Records of engagement Survey/phone questionnaire
4. To promote the activities and achievements of the RHP	Level of awareness of RHP's activities Level of support for RHP's activities	Records of contact, funding Survey/phone questionnaire
5. To explain the importance of river health to the wider community	Level of awareness and understanding about river health issues Degree of satisfaction with RHP's communication products	Media monitoring and analysis Survey/phone questionnaire

## 7. Action Plan

Every member of the RHP team has a responsibility for engagement and needs to agree to this Strategy and its implementation. Engagement skills need to be written into the selection criteria and duty statements of all new RHP employees. It also needs to be recognised as integral to the skills of the RHP's team members. The RHP team are currently finalising an Action Plan for the next six months.