

MEDIA RELEASE

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Community alliance warns Victoria could be left high and dry without drastic change to water management

An alliance of community and environment groups have made a public plea to the Victorian government to drastically change tack on water management across the state or risk leaving Victoria high and dry.

The alliance has published a joint statement and written to Acting Water Minister, Richard Wynne, as the government prepares the Central and Gippsland Sustainable Water Strategy (CGSWS) – a strategy that will lock in the next 10 years of water management for an area covering waterways and catchments south of the Great divide right down to the coast and all the way from the Otways to East Gippsland.

The groups fear the new strategy will repeat decades of unsustainable water management practices which has seen the deterioration of river ecosystem health across the state and made no substantial departure from the extractive practices that endanger our waterways.

They also assert that the concerns of community and environment groups have been ignored in an opaque process and in favour of a commodification approach that is in direct contradiction with sustainability and could lead to further deterioration of waterways and even ecosystem collapse.

The CGSWS encompasses a huge portion of Victoria's rivers and waterways including the Yarra, Barwon, Latrobe, Thompson, Snowy and Mitchell rivers. The joint statement outlines the alliance's concerns about unsustainable water management practices across the regions and makes a series of recommendations for ensuring environmental protection is at the core of the new CGSWS.

Elke Nicholson lawyer from Environmental Justice Australia said:

“We are facing a water crisis in Victoria. Our rivers are depleted by over-extraction; wetlands on the brink of collapse due to insufficient flows; groundwater dependent ecosystems drying and dying; and contaminants leaching into our waterways.

“The decade ahead will see intensifying threats to the availability and quality of water to meet human and environmental needs. Pressure is rising from a collision of cumulative factors which need to be adequately addressed: population growth, climate change and decades of water management practices viewing water as an endlessly extractable resource for human use.

“Our alliance of individuals and community groups has come together in our shared concern over the inaction and mismanagement of water in Victoria to raise a united voice for the rivers and waterways of the Central and Gippsland regions, a voice that is currently being ignored in the state government's development of the next 10-year Sustainable Water Strategy.

Cameron Steele from People for a Living Moorabool said:

“We continue to be deeply concerned that the views of community environment groups are being ignored. So far the new CGSWS has been prepared with manifestly inadequate attempts to engage and integrate the voice of community environmental organisations. This needs to change.

“The knowledge and perspective of environmental advocacy groups is essential to inform the urgent policy shifts needed to restore our waterways. The CGSWS is an opportunity to respond to the water crisis with ambition and foresight, to clearly articulate the emergency we face and to bring water policy in line with a resilient water future. The Government must not marginalise the views of community organisations, doing so runs counter to the central intention of the CGSWS and squanders a vital opportunity.”

Tracey Anton from Friends of Latrobe Water (FLOW) said:

“It’s critical the Victorian government doesn’t repeat the mistakes of the past when it comes to managing our precious water sources. Decades of overextraction and mismanagement have left our waterways depleted, diverted and polluted. Without a strategy that incorporates the rehabilitation and restoration of these waterways – our region’s environment has little chance of recovery and faces a bleak future.

“Water management must work within our ecological limits and it must work to protect, restore and connect the precious water sources we have left. This is an enormous opportunity for the Victorian government to right past wrongs and create a genuinely sustainable future for our region’s waterways.”

Andrew Kelly from Yarra Riverkeeper said:

"We sincerely hope that the Victorian government seriously considers the concerns and recommendations we have outlined in our joint statement and letter to the Minister and that they genuinely engage with our alliance of community and environment groups so that the SWS so can be the powerful tool for environmental protection that it is intended to be.

“Without a drastic change of tack in the way water is managed, the rivers, lakes and wetlands and the magnificent wildlife that lives there could be lost forever, and little water will remain for anyone.”

Signatories to the joint statement are: *Environmental Justice Australia, Yarra Riverkeeper, Environment Victoria, People for a Living Moorabool, Werribee River Association, Friends of Latrobe Water Inc., Friends of Steele Creek, Gippsland Environment Group, Friends of the Barwon Inc., Friends of the Merri Creek, Friends of the Earth, Melbourne, Upper Deep Creek Landcare Group, Friends of Lower Kororoit Creek Inc., Riddells Creek Landcare, Friends of the Maribyrnong Valley, Jacksons Creek EcoNetwork, Kooyongkoot Alliance, Native Fish Australia (Vic), Gippsland Lakes Recreational Fishing Alliance, Darebin Creek Management Committee Inc., Friends of Banyule, Federation of Environment and Horticulture in the Macedon Ranges, Riverland Conservation Society of Heidelberg, NatureWest Inc.*

Read the joint statement.

Media:

Those quoted are available for interview. Images available. To arrange an interview or for further information please contact Livia Cullen on 0411 108 239 media@envirojustice.org.au