

Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project – Expert Review Panel

August 11, 2009

Peter Harris
Secretary
Department of Sustainability & Environment
8 Nicholson Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Secretary

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change endorsed the Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project (NVIRP) Expert Review Panel (ERP) with the responsibility to provide advice to NVIRP, the Minister for Water and the Secretary, Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) in relation to the relevant conditions in the decision of the Minister for Planning that an Environmental Effects Statement (EES) is not required for the NVIRP. The ERP is Denis Flett (Chair), Jane Roberts and Terry Hillman and are all independent consultants experienced in the ecological relationships to hydrological changes.

The ERP has taken an active role in assisting the NVIRP and their consultants in finalising documentation in relation to the conditions in the decision of the Minister for Planning. The ERP has met on ten days to assess the adequacy of the documentation, the appropriateness of the process, the content of the documentation and the likely outcomes from application of the final documents. Our critique and suggestions were welcomed in a collaborative spirit, and we trust that NVIRP and DSE have benefited from this external perspective.

With all NVIRP documentation which is currently required now in place, we are pleased to place on record our advice on the *Wetlands Short-listing Report* and *Waterways Short-listing Report*. This advice is summarised in Table 1 of this letter with detailed advice enclosed in stand-alone documents.

Conditions over the past five years in the Goulburn-Murray Irrigation District (GMID) have been affected by the continuing drought. This has meant that already water constrained environments are further stressed from continual low hydrologic flows. NVIRP has been established at a time when the demands on the water resources in the area are at their historical peak. To manage these demands many changes have been implemented in the GMID that have resulted in reduced flows to the wetlands and waterways that are connected in some way to the irrigation system.

The impact of NVIRP in reducing inflows to waterways and wetlands needs to be separated from the cumulative impacts of drought, drought-related management practices and existing system demands. As such, the documents referred to ERP were assessed from a perspective which takes account of the influencing factors beyond the responsibility of NVIRP which have changed

and are changing the hydrologic connections between wetlands and waterways and the irrigation system, as well as associated management of environmental water.

Table 1: Expert Review Panel Advice Summary

Document Reviewed	Concluding Advice	Detailed Advice
Wetland Short-listing Report	<p>The short-listing process produced a robust list of wetlands for which Environmental Watering Plans are to be produced.</p> <p>The process may be applied again, in the future, to assess a wider array of inputs of incidental irrigation water.</p>	Enclosed
Waterway Short-listing Report	<p>The short-listing process produced a robust list of waterways for which Environmental Watering Plans are to be produced.</p> <p>The process may be applied again, in the future, to assess a wider array of inputs of incidental irrigation water.</p>	Enclosed

The Minister's conditions were received by NVIRP on the 20th April 2009. The timeline for the approval of these documents (by 15th August 2009) was tight, and in some cases compromised the level of scrutiny and detail provided in the documentation. The ERP commends NVIRP, their consultants and DSE for the amount of work completed in the short time available to them.

The ERP is pleased to have had the opportunity to support NVIRP in progressing the environmentally responsible operation of the modernised irrigation system for which NVIRP has responsibility.

Sincerely,

Denis Flett

Chair

Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project Expert Review Panel

Copy To:

1. The Hon. Tim Holding, Minister for Water, Department of Sustainability & Environment
2. Murray Smith, Chief Executive Officer of the Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project