

Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project – Expert Review Panel

January 8, 2010

Greg Wilson
Secretary of the Department of Sustainability and Environment
Department of Sustainability & Environment
8 Nicholson Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Secretary

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change endorsed the appointment of the Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project (NVIRP) Expert Review Panel (ERP). The ERP has 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 Environment 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. Recently, NVIRP has commissioned six technical reports to quantify hydrological changes and their associated ecological consequences. These technical reports have been developed by NVIRP to support its Public Environment Report (PER) submission to the Federal Government as required through the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act) referral. The purpose of this letter is to convey to you the advice of the ERP in relation to these technical reports.

We are pleased to place on record our advice on the following six technical reports:

- **Technical Report #1:** Sinclair Knight Merz (2009a). Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project: Assessment of Hydrological Changes from the operation of the NVIRP modernised GMID - Surface Water Hydrology, Sinclair Knight Merz report (Final Version) prepared for the Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project, Shepparton
- **Technical Report #2:** Sinclair Knight Merz (2009b). Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project: Assessment of Hydrological Changes from the operation of the NVIRP modernised GMID - Groundwater Hydrology, Sinclair Knight Merz report (Final Version) prepared for the Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project, Shepparton
- **Technical Report #3:** King, A.J. and Tonkin, Z. (2009). Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project: Operational impact assessment on aquatic fauna. Unpublished client report. Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research. Department of Sustainability and Environment, Heidelberg

- **Technical Report #4:** Brett Lane & Associates (2009). Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project: Operational Impact Assessment on Terrestrial Vertebrate Fauna, Brett Lane & Associates report 9056.2(2.8) prepared for Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project, Shepparton
- **Technical Report #5:** Ecological Associates (2009). Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project: Assessment of Impacts on Flora Issues of National Environmental Significance, Ecological Associates report EI001-3-D prepared for Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project, Shepparton
- **Technical Report #6:** Hale, J. (2009). Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project: Operation Impact Assessment on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Wetlands), Report prepared for Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project, Shepparton, Jennifer Hale, Kinglake

Our concluding advice is summarised in **Table 1** of this letter with detailed advice enclosed in three stand-alone documents.

Table 1: Expert Review Panel Advice Summary

Document Reviewed	Concluding Advice
<p><u>Technical Report #1:</u> Surface Water Report</p> <p>&</p> <p><u>Technical Report #2:</u> Groundwater Report</p>	<p>The ERP concludes that together the hydrological reports have provided the information needed for ecological assessment in a form that can be used by the ecologists and is therefore appropriate for purpose. They provide readable but comprehensive technical analyses on a range of hydrological changes expected to result from the operation of NVIRP modernisation.</p> <p>The work completed specifically for the Groundwater Report actively contributes to the knowledge and understanding of groundwater processes within northern Victoria. The work on defining the buffer zone near irrigation channels to help determine the potential for channel recharge groundwater to affect adjacent wetlands was an original piece of work that has contributed effectively to the ecological investigations. The Groundwater Report has added to the overall knowledge of groundwater within the Murray Darling Basin.</p>
<p><u>Technical Report #3:</u> Aquatic Fauna Report & <u>Technical Report #4:</u> Terrestrial Vertebrate Fauna Report & <u>Technical Report #5:</u> Flora Report</p>	<p>Collectively the three ecological reports have analysed and evaluated the Federally-listed species and community occurrences in light of the likely hydrological changes and each has made a determination based on the relevant EPBC Act Significant Impact Criteria. These determinations represent an evaluation of potential threats posed by the operation of NVIRP modernisation with regard to EPBC Act Significant Impact Criteria. The ERP considers these determinations and their conclusions to be adequate for that purpose.</p>
<p><u>Technical Report #6:</u> Ramsar Wetlands Report</p>	<p>The Ramsar Wetland Report has evaluated Ramsar sites within the probable zone of influence of operational changes due to NVIRP modernisation using the relevant EPBC Act Significant Impact Criteria specific to Wetlands of International Importance. The evaluation used a number of the hydrological findings prepared as part of the PER process and produced a clear and readable report. The ERP concludes that this is a sound evaluation and appropriate for purpose.</p>

In summary, it is the advice of the ERP that the six technical reports that have been prepared for NVIRP are suitable for supporting the PER. The reports provide a suitable outline of the potential ecological impacts of the predicted hydrological changes from the operation of the NVIRP modernised irrigation system in the GMID.

While the six technical reports address the requirements of the Public Environment Report (PER), the ERP recognises that some content in these reports will be a useful contribution to the knowledge needed for the assessment report that is required under Condition 4 of the decision made by the Victorian Minister for Planning.

Looking forward, the ERP advises that the key priorities, before the commencement of the 2010-2011 irrigation season, should include:

- Scoping and scheduling the technical work that will need to be commissioned for the assessment report required to address Condition 4 of the decision by the Minister for Planning that no EES is required for the NVIRP; scoping and scheduling should be commenced as soon as possible to provide adequate time for refinement and iteration;
- Finalising and communicating any amendments to the Water Change Management Framework that will guide the preparation of Environmental Watering Plans, including the Framework for Mitigation Water and water balance calculation methodologies; and
- Completing the Environmental Watering Plans related to wetlands and waterways understood to be hydrologically impacted by the 2010 infrastructure works.

The ERP is pleased to have had the opportunity to provide this advice.

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