

# Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project – Expert Review Panel

February 25, 2010

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

Dear Secretary

I write to inform you of a view from the Expert Review Panel (ERP) on how NVIRP has utilised advice and feedback from the ERP in regard to the process of short-listing wetlands for which an Environmental Watering Plan may be required.

In its advice provided to the Minister of Water on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2009 the ERP noted that for wetlands, there were risks associated with adopting the SKM Desktop Assessment as the basis for the short-listing process outlined within the Water Change Management Framework. The Desktop Assessment carried out its evaluation sequentially, assessing environmental value first then assessing hydrological characteristics only for those sites deemed to have significant environmental value. This meant that a very large number of sites had to be assessed for environmental value (e.g. greater than one thousand wetlands) limiting the primary basis for evaluation to information already available and resulting in assessments heavily dependent on the existence of Ramsar-type international agreements and listed sightings of threatened species. Although ameliorated to some extent by workshops and regional consultation the ERP noted that there remained some residual risk that ecologically important assets may not be assessed hydrologically through lack of knowledge.

The ERP reached a view at that time that a more targeted approach would be to start with identifying hydrologic connections to wetlands which may be affected by NVIRP modernisation works and then to undertake appropriate assessment of high environmental value. This view was communicated to NVIRP personnel on several occasions.

Subsequently, the ERP has reviewed the hydrological and ecological assessment reports as part of the Public Environment Report preparation. The ERP recognises that the logic in the approach to the hydrological and ecological assessment reports is consistent with the view previously reached by the ERP in that it starts with the hydrological connections to wetlands and then assesses environmental values. As such, the approach also addresses the risks previously identified by the ERP and included in its advice of the 11<sup>th</sup> August 2009 as referred to above.

This change of approach is evident in the amendments to be incorporated in the Water Change Management Framework document and is an example of practical adaptive management. One of the amendments incorporates a localised impact assessment method which was developed as part of the Groundwater Report (Technical Report #2). This method directly addresses the gap which ERP had identified and has the capacity to add wetlands to the short-list for which Environmental Watering Plans may be required.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'D Flett'.

**Denis Flett**

*Chair*

*Northern Victoria Irrigation Renewal Project Expert Review Panel*