

Developing the third Victorian Waterway Management Strategy

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Key points

- The draft Third Victorian Waterway Management Strategy has been publicly released and consultation has now closed; this paper reflects a point-in-time before final government approval.
- The draft Strategy updates Victoria's established catchment-based framework rather than replacing it, with stronger emphasis on climate adaptation, cultural governance and integrated urban waterway management.
- Public feedback broadly supported the strategic direction.
- Examples from riparian works, environmental watering, wetlands, estuaries, urban stormwater and community stewardship show why statewide policy must remain adaptive and locally grounded.

Abstract

Victoria is finalising the Third Victorian Waterway Management Strategy after releasing a draft for public comment in 2026. This paper reports on the evolution of the draft Strategy since the 11th Australian Stream Management Conference, focusing on new and strengthened policy directions that were tested through public consultation. The paper does not present final government policy. Instead, it explains the policy proposals that have been tested, the types of refinements suggested through submissions, and why the overall strategic direction remains focused on adaptive, collaborative and regionally grounded waterway management.

The draft Strategy responds to the long-term challenge of sustaining rivers, wetlands, estuaries and floodplains in highly modified landscapes. It builds on Victoria's established catchment management framework while strengthening the recognition of waterways as living and connected systems, the role of Traditional Owner cultural governance, climate adaptation planning, integration with land use planning, management of urban stormwater, and protection of key waterway values.

Feedback received during public consultation broadly welcomed the direction of the draft Strategy and identified opportunities to improve clarity, accountability and implementation detail. This paper uses practical examples from waterway management themes — riparian land, river channels, wetlands, estuaries, water quality, environmental water and urban waterways — to show how statewide policy can guide difficult regional decisions while remaining transparent about the balancing of values and uses of waterways.

Keywords

Victorian waterways, climate adaptation, cultural governance, riparian management, wetlands, estuaries, water quality, regional planning

Introduction

The Third Victorian Waterway Management Strategy is being developed to guide the management of Victoria's rivers, wetlands, estuaries and floodplains over the next decade. It replaces the 2013 Victorian Waterway Management Strategy and provides the framework for government, waterway managers, Traditional Owners and regional communities to sustain waterways and balance the values and uses they support (DEECA, 2026a).

This paper reflects a point in time in the Strategy development process. The draft Strategy was released for public comment in 2026 after several years of review, scoping, policy development and partner

engagement. Consultation has now closed and submissions have suggested refinements, particularly to clarity, accountability, and implementation. At the time of writing, those refinements are being considered, but they do not require a change in the broad strategic direction being taken to government for final consideration.



Figure 1 Development timeline for the Third Victorian Waterway Management Strategy

Policy context: from strategy to implementation

Victoria has a long-standing catchment management framework, with regional waterway strategies sitting beneath statewide policy and guiding priority-setting and delivery. The draft Strategy continues that approach, but updates it for a period in which waterway managers are dealing with compounded pressures: climate change, population growth, ongoing legacy impacts, and increasing community use of waterways.

The draft Strategy is structured around a 50-year vision and long-term outcomes for Traditional Owner cultural rights and responsibilities, living and connected waterway ecosystems and habitats, community values and uses of waterways, and efficient and effective planning and management. It includes 68 policies and 49 actions in the public consultation draft, with policies described as either refinements of existing policy, new to the Strategy because they reflect more recent Victorian Government policy, or new policy developed through the current strategy process (DEECA, 2026a).

What has changed since the 11ASM conference paper?

The 2024 conference paper described the need for a new strategy and the policy areas being developed. Two years later, the discussion has shifted. The question is no longer simply how the Strategy should recognise climate change, Traditional Owner rights, living waterways and integrated management. Those ideas have now been drafted, tested with partners and released for public comment.

Public consultation also tested the balance between continuity and reform. The draft Strategy recognised that Victoria already has strong institutions, established regional planning processes and a history of active waterway management to build upon, rather than wholesale change. This was supported too in public feedback.

The importance of waterway condition

The draft Strategy is built around a simple proposition: waterway values depend on waterway condition. Waterways supply drinking water, support irrigated agriculture, provide habitat and corridors for species, enable recreation and tourism, and hold deep cultural significance for Traditional Owners. The public consultation draft notes that drinking water for more than five million people and more than \$5 billion in irrigated agricultural production annually depend on waterways (DEECA, 2026a). It also notes that recreational fishing involves more than one million Victorians and contributes substantially to the economy.

The policy challenge is that these values are not separate. A river reach that supports agricultural production may also support platypus, recreational fishing, cultural places, local tourism and drinking water supply. Declining condition can increase water treatment costs, reduce habitat, undermine recreational opportunities and constrain productive uses. That is why the draft Strategy frames waterway management as balancing values and uses while sustaining the underlying conditions that make those values possible.

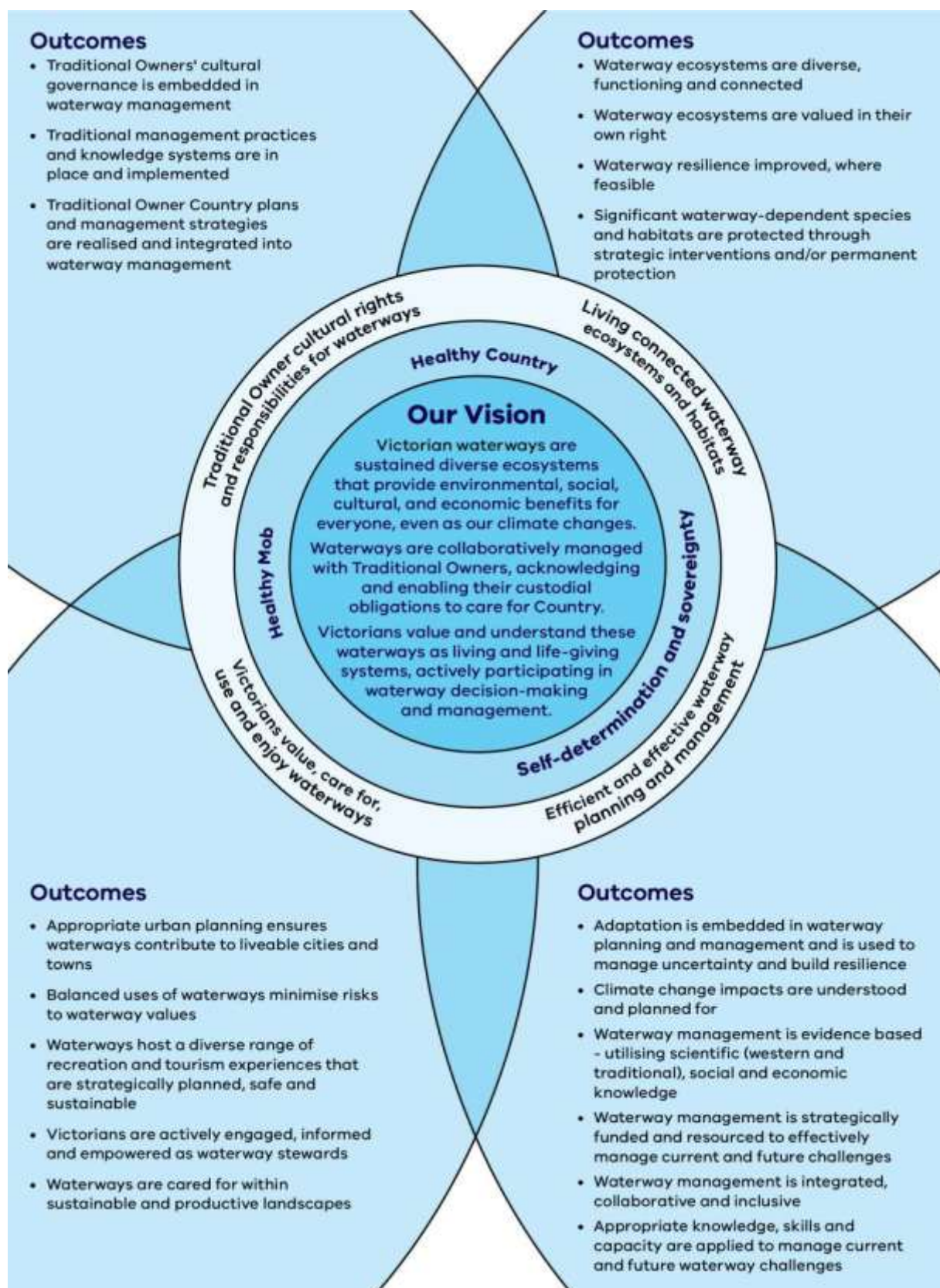


Figure 2 Policy outcomes to be translated through regional waterway strategies and place-based decisions

Examples of policy directions tested through consultation

Recognising waterways as living and connected systems

One of the most visible policy shifts is the draft recognition of waterways as living and connected entities. This is not described as legal personhood, a new governance structure or a change to statutory functions. Rather, it is a way of guiding how waterway managers and partners understand and perform their functions: seeing waterways as connected systems with ecological, cultural and community relationships, rather than as isolated assets or individual works sites.

A practical example is floodplain reconnection. In a highly regulated system, restoring every natural flood is not feasible. However, recognising the river, floodplain wetlands and riparian land as a connected living system helps frame investments such as environmental watering infrastructure, fish passage works, riparian revegetation and pest control as complementary tools. This makes it easier to explain why a regulator, a fishway, fencing and environmental water delivery may be part of the same regional outcome rather than separate projects.

Planning for resilience, transition and transformation

Climate adaptation was one of the strongest areas of new policy development. The draft Strategy recognises that some waterway values can be supported to remain resilient, while others may need to transition or transform under climate change. This is a difficult conversation because communities often value current ecological, recreational or cultural conditions, even where those values are already under stress.

An example is a small upland stream or wetland repeatedly affected by bushfire, flood and prolonged drying. A resilience approach may involve riparian protection, erosion control and invasive species management to allow recovery after shocks. A transition approach may accept that a different mix of species and flow conditions is likely, while still maintaining habitat structure, water quality and cultural values. A transformation approach may be needed where previous conditions cannot return and the management objective becomes sustaining new values, avoiding maladaptation and being transparent with communities about trade-offs. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and management objectives may consider a combination.

Riparian land

Riparian management remains a core delivery theme because riparian condition affects bank stability, habitat, shade, water temperature, sediment loads and water quality. The draft Strategy notes that much riparian land in cleared catchments is privately managed and that stock access remains a major threat. Consultation responses emphasised the need for clearer standards, and also the vital role that farmers and other landholders play in riparian management. They provide access to land (particularly when there is no crown frontage), control pest plant and animals, and partner with waterway managers on the management of waterways and long-term stewardship of catchments.

The practical example is familiar across Victoria: fencing a river frontage, establishing off-stream watering, controlling weeds and revegetating with appropriate native species. The policy issue is not whether these tools work — they are well understood — but how to sustain them over time, how to prioritise where they are most needed, how to work with landholders, and how to account for climate change in species selection, seed supply and survival of young plants.

River channels

River channel management has moved away from a narrow focus on control and stabilisation. Many Victorian channels have been altered by clearing, mining, sand movement, straightening, levees, weirs and dams. Some interventions are necessary to protect public assets and safety, but policy recognises that river movement, sediment transport and channel adjustment are part of natural function. The draft Strategy reinforces this existing policy.

For example, a reach affected by historical mining sediment may require carefully designed erosion control and habitat works, rather than a default hard-engineering response. A regional strategy can document why a reach is being managed for channel stability, why another may be allowed more room to move, and how risks to private and public infrastructure will be considered under cost-sharing principles.

Wetlands

Wetlands attracted detailed feedback because they are highly valued, highly threatened and often located on private land. The draft Strategy identifies wetland loss and altered hydrology as ongoing issues, including evidence that wetland condition is generally stronger on public land than private land. Consultation supported the need for stronger protection of wetlands, and support for farmers and landholders and cautioned against regulatory impacts.

A practical example is an ephemeral wetland on private agricultural land that has historically been grazed during dry periods. The policy question is how to recognise that wetland as part of the waterway system, and work with landholders on realistic management options. The public feedback suggests the final Strategy should explain this pathway more clearly.

Water quality

Water quality is both a theme in its own right and a thread running through all waterway decisions. The draft Strategy recognises pressures from diffuse pollution, runoff, legacy impacts and changing flow regimes.

The practical examples are varied: stormwater carrying nutrients and litter from urban streets, sediment from erosion after a flood or bushfire, nutrients from rural runoff, or low dissolved oxygen in a regulated system. These examples show why water quality cannot be managed by one agency or lever. It requires integrated catchment and water cycle management, effective pollution regulation, landholder practice change, stormwater planning and, in some systems, more flexible storage operations to help manage downstream water quality risks. The draft Strategy captures these various tools.

Estuaries and urban waterways

Estuaries highlight the complexity of managing systems that are naturally dynamic but increasingly affected by development, altered freshwater inflows, climate change and sea-level rise. Consultation feedback asked for stronger recognition of coastal squeeze and saline intrusion. The practical challenge is that an estuary may support fish, birds, tourism, agriculture, cultural values, floodplain wetlands and nearby infrastructure, and those values do not always align.

Urban waterways raise a related but distinct policy challenge. The new Strategy devotes greater attention to urban waterways and excess stormwater than previous strategies. In growth areas, increased impervious surfaces change runoff volumes, pollutant loads and stream form. The practical example is a rapidly urbanising catchment where waterway managers, local government, developers and water corporations need to align land use planning, integrated water management, drainage design and community amenity. Feedback supported the focus on urban waterways but asked for stronger planning tools and funding mechanisms.

What public consultation added

Public consultation provided a useful stress test for the draft Strategy. It confirmed broad support for the direction while highlighting where readers needed more detail. Feedback welcomed stronger recognition of Traditional Owner self-determination, climate change, integrated water management and community stewardship.

The feedback did not point to a need to change the strategic direction of the draft Strategy. Instead, it points to refinements that could make the final Strategy easier to understand and implement, including

clearer wording, clearer descriptions of roles and responsibilities, and stronger explanation of how monitoring and adaptive management will work.

Discussion

The most important policy shift is the explicit movement from describing waterway management as a set of technical interventions to describing it as adaptive decision-making in connected systems. Riparian fencing, environmental watering, stormwater management, works on waterways permits and community stewardship are still essential. What is changing is the way those tools are framed: more emphasis is placed on the need for tools to be directed to regionally agreed outcomes, informed by cultural and scientific knowledge, tested against climate futures, and adapted as monitoring and community expectations change.

The public consultation process also highlights the limits of statewide policy. The Strategy can set direction, expectations and principles, but many outcomes depend on regional waterway strategies, implementation planning, business cases, equitable partnerships with Traditional Owners, decisions by other portfolios, local government capability, landholder participation and available funding. Being clear about those limits is important. It avoids presenting the Strategy as a promise that every issue will be fixed, while still making it an authoritative guide for the next decade of waterway management.

Conclusions

The Third Victorian Waterway Management Strategy marks an evolution in Victoria's waterway policy, not a reset. It builds on established regional planning and delivery arrangements while responding to climate change, Traditional Owner rights and responsibilities, community expectations and the realities of managing highly modified waterways.

Public consultation has broadly supported the strategic direction and provided constructive refinements. The strongest message is that the Strategy should be clearer about how policy intent becomes implementation: who acts, at what scale, using which tools, and how progress will be monitored and reported. The examples in this paper demonstrate that practical policy implementation will occur through integrated regional planning, long-term partnerships, targeted on-ground works, regulation, incentives, environmental water management, and transparent adaptive decisions with those impacted by them.

The final Strategy, once approved, will need to guide a decade of adaptive waterway management. Its success will be judged not by whether it resolves every tension in statewide policy, but by whether it helps Victoria's waterway managers, Traditional Owners, communities and partners make better decisions together as conditions continue to change.

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