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Gwyther et.al. - Setting the standard for follow-up riparian inspections and landholder engagement

Did it work? Do the landholders value and manage it? Is it still there? Setting the standard for follow up riparian inspections and landholder engagement.

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Key Points

- Re-engagement with landholders and inspection of past riparian work sites is required to ensure management is continued long-term.
- DELWP is producing a standard that enables a consistent re-inspection process to be undertaken across Victoria.
- Data collected through the standards will enable comparison across the regions and through time to build a picture of project success at the state level.
- The standards incorporate a flexible approach enabling CMAs to add-on data collection components to enable process improvement, fill their knowledge gaps and for DELWP to provide specific data for investors when its needed.

Abstract

Governments spend substantial public funds collaborating with landholders on riparian protection and improvement works. Landholder commitment to these projects is critical to ensure their ongoing management and success, and continued agency engagement motivates this commitment. However, the extent of agency follow-up varies widely between regions and data collection regarding long-term maintenance, project outcomes and landholder satisfaction is often ad hoc and noncomprehensive. In short, it can be difficult for regional and state agencies to demonstrate that this high level of government investment has achieved its aims and is secured long-term.

The Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning is addressing these issues by developing obligatory best practice standards for follow up site inspection and landholder re-engagement. They will ensure consistent data collection, enabling managers to tell the story of riparian management successes to their stakeholders. The standards will also support CMA staff to revisit sites to see where improvements can be made at the site, relationship and program levels.

This paper presents a snapshot of current Victorian process, a summary of what riparian project managers have learnt from earlier engagement, the challenges associated with developing a consistent approach across the regions and how these are being addressed by the standards.

Keywords

Riparian, landholder, engagement, standards, compliance, evaluation, works monitoring

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Introduction

Background

As part of the Victorian Government's Waterway Management Program, there is substantial investment in riparian protection and improvement projects on freehold and Crown land by Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs). These projects involve CMAs working collaboratively with landholders to undertake works such as stock management fencing, weed control, revegetation and the provision of infrastructure to support off-stream stock watering. These works are then secured via landholder agreements, appropriate to the tenure type (i.e. Riparian Management Agreements on freehold and Crown land, with the addition of Riparian Management Licences on Crown land).

Given that public funds are used for these riparian works it is critical to protect the investment in the long-term. To achieve this, it has been recommended that existing and future riparian work sites on both Crown and private riparian land have some sort of follow up inspection by their CMA to ensure that the site is being managed according to the responsibilities and obligations specified in landholder agreements (Roberts et al., 2017). This approach is consistent with current Government policy:

Waterway managers will maintain long-term contact with landholders who have agreements, including site visits as appropriate. Maintaining long-term relationships with landholders will help to ensure that the sites are being managed and works are being maintained according to the obligations in riparian management agreements.

Policy 9.7, Victorian Waterway Management Strategy (DEPI, 2013)

Ongoing CMA engagement with landholders after works can also foster and maintain landholder commitment to undertaking long-term management, provide the opportunity to offer support and encourage further works to protect the initial investment, such as replanting if natural recruitment fails, weed control if livestock removal results in excessive weed growth or follow up willow control.

A systematic program of site inspections can also be used for consistent data collection, enabling regional and state managers to tell the story of riparian management successes to their communities, potential collaborators and investors and to evaluate and refine CMA planning and implementation processes.

Development of the standards

The Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is capitalising on these opportunities by developing the *Riparian site inspection and landholder evaluation standards* ('the standards'). These are obligatory best practice standards for follow up site inspection and landholder re-engagement that will support CMA staff to:

- assess whether the works invested in by the state are still in place (e.g. fencing)
- assess whether the landholder is meeting the obligations or conditions in their management agreement (e.g. site maintenance, stock control)
- assess site trajectory and threats
- see where process improvements can be made
- develop an understanding of the landholder's perspectives toward the project and CMA
- assess whether follow up works or support are required.

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Method

The project team includes experts in waterway and riparian condition monitoring; measurement of the social dimensions of regional natural resource management; monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement processes; and standard and decision support tool development. The standards build on current CMA approaches to site inspection and landholder evaluation, as outlined in Figure 1 below.

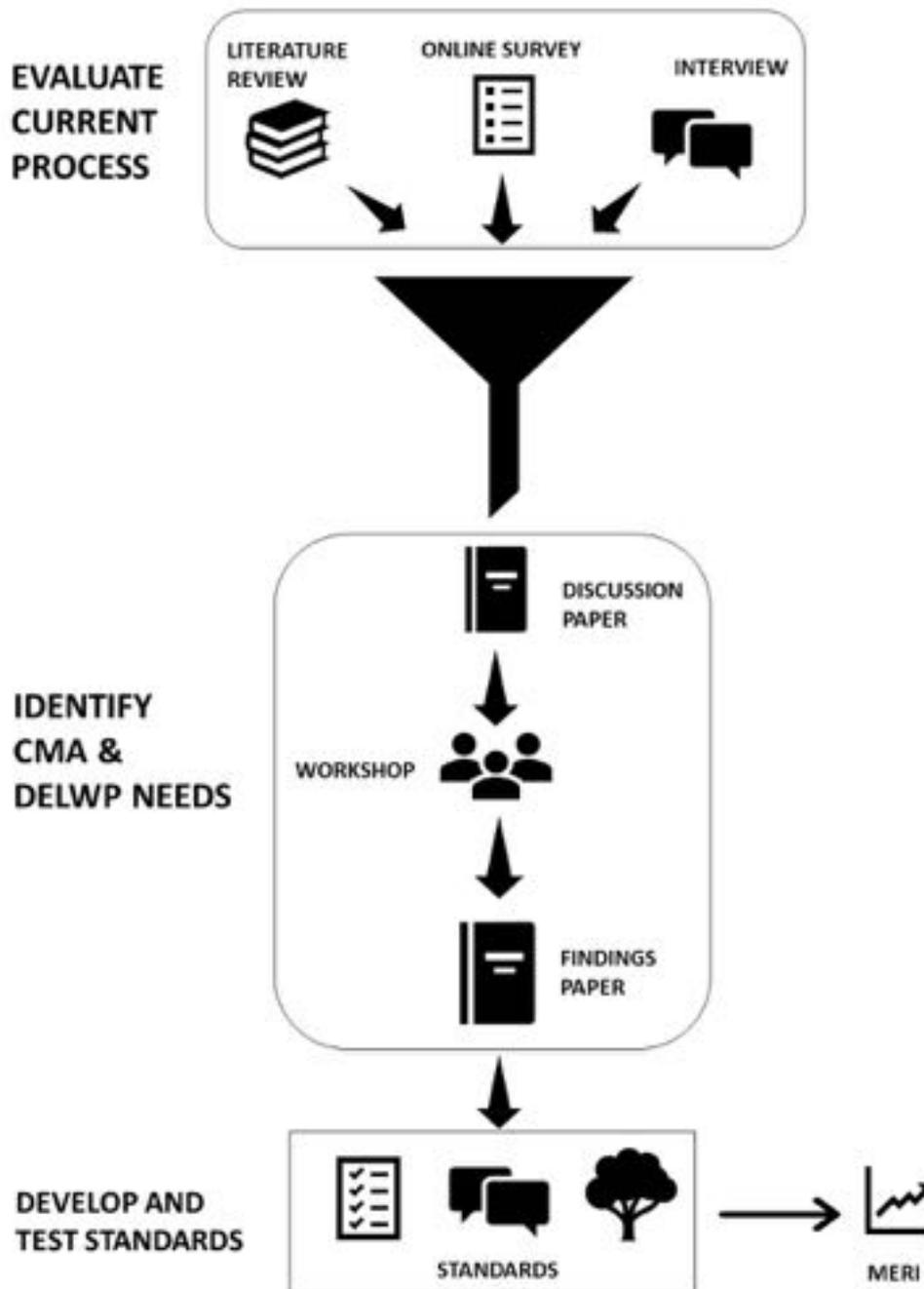


Figure 1 - Overview of process to develop the riparian inspection standards.

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The project process included:

1. a literature review of current and recent CMA and state approaches to riparian site inspection and landholder reengagement (Riverness, 2018);
2. an online survey of CMA staff, exploring CMA requirements for the standards and the experience and lessons learned from previous landholder re-engagement and site inspection programs;
3. follow up interviews with key CMA staff to discuss their needs for data collection, identify barriers to implementation of the standards, understand regional differences, and to test approaches;
4. a workshop with key DELWP and CMA staff to outline the criteria for development of the standards, supported by a discussion paper summarising project findings to date; and
5. development of standards with DELWP and CMA input and review.

The project is overseen by a working group consisting of representatives from CMAs and DELWP's Waterway Health team.

Current CMA processes

Most CMAs have at some point undertaken assessments of riparian sites and/or surveys of landholder perspectives. Various forms of evaluation and audit have also been undertaken at a statewide level (Ede, 2011; Water Technology, 2015). The emphasis of these evaluations varies but usually includes on-ground biophysical outcomes, landholder management actions and landholder attitudes to the projects.

CMA staff generally believe that overall, landholders are maintaining their sites (Roberts et al., 2017). However, data to support this belief is not consistently collected across the state, making it difficult to capture the state-wide picture of site condition and to sell this message to investors and the community. As the regional CMAs and the state-level DELWP conduct riparian site inspection and landholder evaluations for a variety of reasons, the approaches taken vary.

There is also substantial variation in the extent to which CMAs re-engage with landholders post-works across the state. Some re-engage on an opportunistic (e.g. following a flood) or ad hoc basis, others have undertaken several iterations of review programs, systematically reviewing all or a subset of works.

Consistent review programs are usually undertaken by CMA staff, whereas ad hoc reviews are often undertaken by researchers or consultants as part of research projects or audits.

Some review processes have the objective of improving management at the site level, others to evaluate implementation and success at the program level or community attitudes at the regional level. State programs generally focus on ensuring that the underlying assumptions regarding the relationship between outputs and outcomes are accurate or on ensuring that works are being delivered to standard at a program level.

Landholder re-engagement generally consists of at least a landholder survey, either structured or unstructured, via phone, paper, online or in person. This may focus on landholder attitudes and/or opinions on project success. Some re-engagement processes also include (or are based around) a site visit, collecting landholder opinions and staff observations regarding the project outputs and the success of project implementation. A few CMAs go beyond this to an actual assessment of site condition change. Often, however, the review periods are too short to effectively assess condition change and sometimes there is just not a strong enough driver for this type of evaluation. More recently, DELWP programs such as the Riparian Intervention Monitoring Program have been implemented at a selection of sites across the state to assess long-term condition change and confirm underlying assumptions between outputs and outcomes.

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Best practice programs

Two examples of comprehensive re-engagement and site inspection processes are currently being undertaken by Goulburn Broken CMA (GBCMA) and North Central CMA (NCCMA). Since 2013/14 GBCMA have been undertaking 25-50 combined site and landholder surveys per year for landholders on priority waterways. This involves staff meeting with landholders to undertake a 1-2 hour interview as well as a site condition assessment which the landholder is encouraged to attend (GBCMA, 2015, C Glassford 2017, pers. comm. 7 December). A seven-page form covering the effectiveness of project delivery, landholder values, associated changes in frontage management, and the potential of further works is completed by CMA staff during this visit (Glassford, 2015).

NCCMA undertake the Re-engaging Landholders – River Health Maintenance Project by revisiting and assessing sites with landholders. The project has the aims of understanding the impact of riparian investment, the value of the incentives provided as part of works and to provide further landholder support if required (North Central CMA, 2016). NCCMA also undertake a comprehensive audit annually to determine factors in project implementation failure or success. The audit is undertaken three years post-works and reviews works quality, landholder compliance, landholder satisfaction with the CMA and the impact of works. Future iterations of the audit aim to review at six and ten years post-works (NCCMA, 2016, 2015). The method involves a desktop audit of project administration, a site visit focusing on works delivery and a survey focusing on landholder satisfaction. A standard template is used to collect information including output, works and outcome assessments.

The approach common to these processes, of a landholder interview plus site visit and evaluation, has been adopted for the standards. To allow a larger number of sites to be investigated across the state, the standards include a simple landholder perspective survey and site assessment of site management (compliance), trajectory and threats as a minimum, with CMAs able to add on more detailed components. This approach is discussed in more detail in a later section of this paper.

What CMAs have learnt (and want to see in the future)

CMAs were asked to identify how their current practices could be improved, to allow the standards to incorporate lessons from past re-engagement and site inspection practices. By interviewing and surveying CMA staff and examining CMA reviews of past programs, it was found that CMAs generally wanted re-engagement and site assessment to be improved in the following ways:

Strategic approach:

- a more strategic, systematic approach coordinated with, and providing data for, Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) programs and process improvement; and
- a targeted process where all questions have a purpose;
- greater consistency across the CMAs to enable data aggregation at the state level and comparison across CMAs.

Practical data collection:

- questions asked in a way that facilitates a clear understanding and response (e.g. multiple choice of answer options), but also provides scope for quotes or novel answers;
- flexibility to follow up a 'no' answer with a 'why' question (in on-line surveys question 'piping' can facilitate this); and
- reliable electronic options for data collection, management and interrogation that enable pre-filling of previously captured information (e.g. landholder and project details), but with the flexibility to use paper landholder survey forms to facilitate rapport development.

Challenges for standard development and potential solutions

Resourcing

CMA's were asked about the barriers they currently experience to undertaking site assessments and re-engaging with landholders (see Figure 2 below). The key barrier identified was 'lack of time/resources', followed by 'lack of a strong (external) driver' and 'lack of an agreed process'. The development of the standards clearly addresses the second and third of these by working with the CMA's to develop a process that all regions will then be obliged to implement, but a clear message from the CMA's is that an increased program of re-engagement and inspection needs to be adequately resourced.

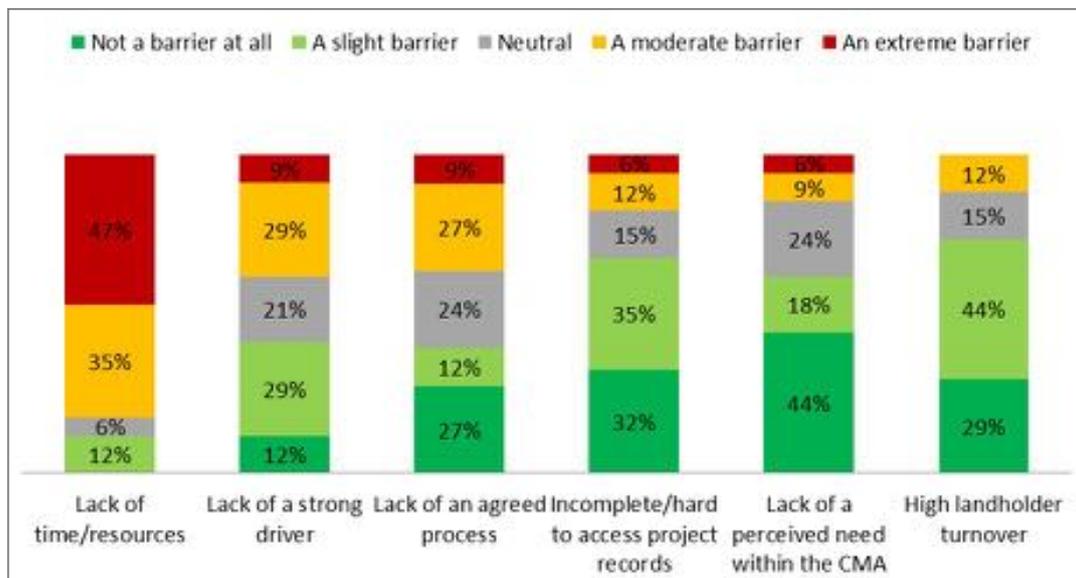


Figure 2 - CMA responses to the question 'To what extent do the following issues stop your CMA from re-engaging with landholders and undertaking site inspections?'

To assist CMA's to manage their resourcing (as well as to meet their own needs for data collection) the standards are designed to ensure flexibility so that CMA's can choose how comprehensive their inspection program is once the minimum data collection (content and number of data points) are collected.

Additional issues that need to be addressed to enable successful implementation of the standards were identified through CMA interviews. These include the need for continuity of data collection from existing processes, regional variation and data collection fatigue.

The need for data continuity

Some CMA's have invested heavily in their current approach to re-engagement and site inspection and will need a strong driver for change. From the interviews and the survey, it was found that a reluctance to change to a new process frequently correlated with a concern that previous data collection efforts would be wasted. Eighty-five percent of surveyed CMA staff indicated that continuity of data collection for the new standards is moderately to very important to them.

The standards strive to address this issue as much as possible by using lines of questioning and data collection based on, and common to, multiple existing CMA re-engagement and site inspection

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processes, and by assisting CMAs to identify where their existing questions align to the new standards. All CMAs have been given the opportunity to help set the criteria for the development as well as provide feedback on draft versions of the standards.

Variation across CMAs

CMAs also identified regional variations as a potential barrier to be overcome for successful implementation of the standards. Regional differences include variation in environmental conditions (e.g. rainfall) and landholder characteristics (e.g. full-time farmer or hobby farmer dominant). This can make it difficult to develop assessment questions that are applicable across the state. These differences have been addressed by ensuring that the minimum data collection that DELWP require for their own MERI processes consists of questions pitched at a broad enough level to be relevant to all CMAs, and by building in the flexibility for CMAs to add their own components where they require region-specific data. There is also the ability to compare CMA performance over time to show improvement relative to past performance if direct comparison with another CMA is not appropriate for a particular metric.

Data collection fatigue

A clear message from CMA interviews was the need for questions to be purposeful, and not seen to be collected just for the sake of it. This seems to be influenced by past experiences of collecting data that has not been subsequently used. CMA staff were confident that the data they collect will be used by their own organisation (70 % moderately or very confident) but were less confident that it will be used by DELWP (50 % moderately or very confident). This has been addressed by ensuring that all questions have a clear purpose. For example, questions facilitate the collection of data that supports DELWP to report to investors or the community or the CMAs to evaluate programs. Alternatively, questions are included where they may trigger further intervention/follow up (such as the presence of high-threat weeds or non-compliance with agreements).

Proposed format

The approach taken to structuring the standards is outlined graphically in Figure 3 below. With this approach, a range of components (landholder perspective, site management, site threats and trajectory) are the mandatory minimum content to be captured by all CMAs during the landholder survey and site inspection. This content was agreed by all CMAs and DELWP to be 'must do' (shown within the black dotted line in Figure 3) and can be used to develop a picture of regional and temporal variation across and within CMAs and to inform reporting to investors at a state level. DELWP have the ability to add on specific data collection in time for investor reporting as well (shown as light yellow).

The standards then provide the structure to develop further topics, 'optional extras' (shown within the orange dotted line) for implementation by a subset of interested CMAs. These may include additional topics or the mandatory topics in more depth. This will enable consistency of data collection and the ability to aggregate across regions, without burdening CMAs not interested in the topic with unnecessary data collection.

For example, CMA 'X' may only want to gather the bare minimum data required by DELWP when it comes to landholder perspectives, so may just capture the 'must do' topics represented as light blue. But they may be very interested in the condition of the site so will collect the topics listed within both the light orange 'must do' and dark orange 'optional extras' boxes of site threats and trajectory. They may also add their own 'optional extra' research question component to meet their regional waterway strategy MERI needs (shown as dark yellow).

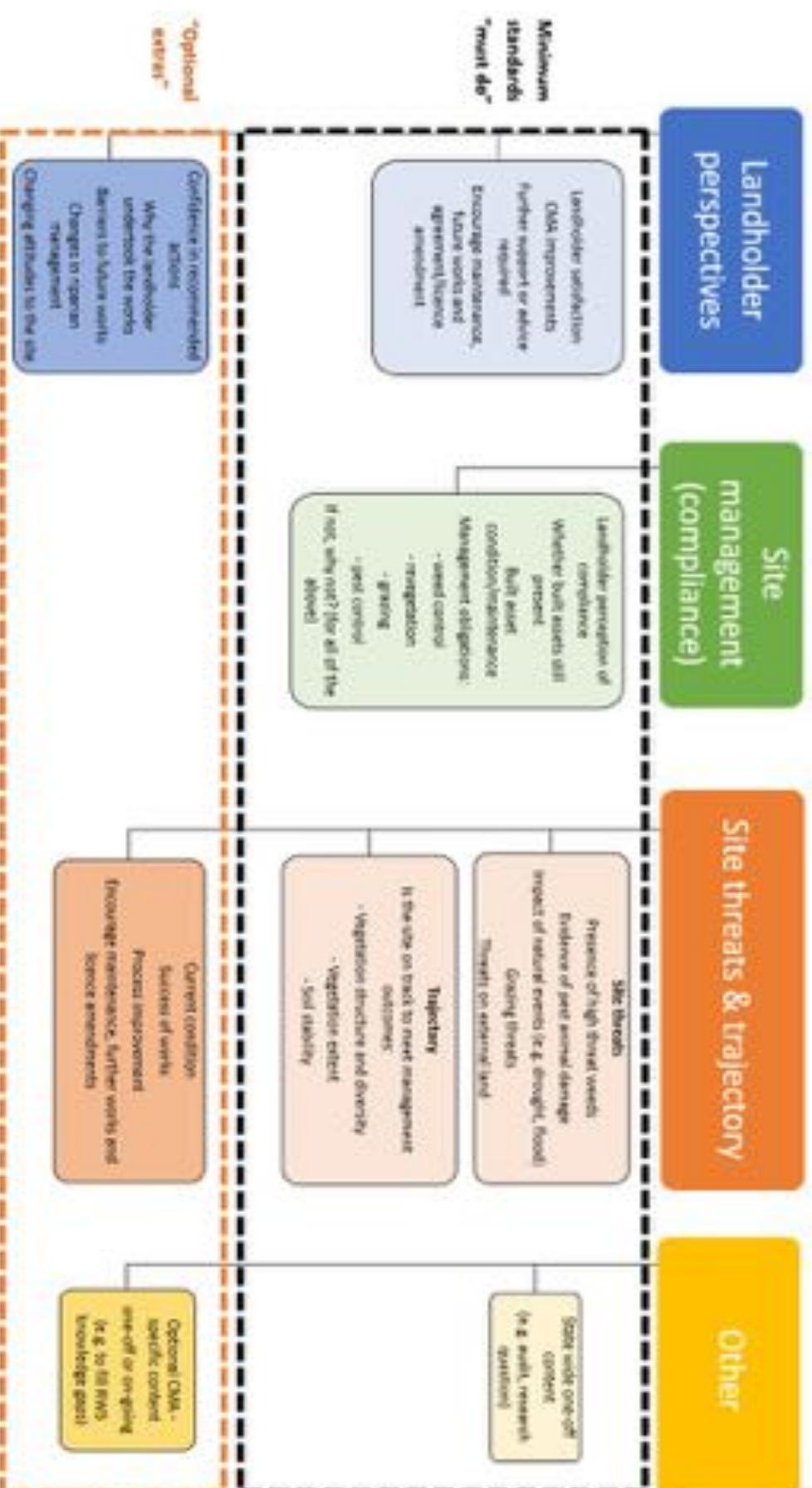


Figure 3 – Graphical representation of the standards structure.

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Conclusions

Re-engagement with landholders and inspection of past riparian work sites is a necessary step in ensuring the long-term management of collaborative CMA-landholder riparian works programs. Challenges to implementing a consistent state-wide standard for re-engagement and site assessment include the need for data continuity with existing long-term data collection programs and flexibility to accommodate regional variation. Data collection fatigue from past programs also needs to be taken into account by ensuring that a clear line is drawn from each question/component of the standards to the uses of the information collected for MERI or management intervention.

Data collected through the standards will enable comparison across the regions and through time to build a picture of project success at a state level. The standards incorporate a flexible approach enabling CMAs to add-on components that fill their specific knowledge gaps and enable process improvement and DELWP to add in components to provide specific data for investors at key points in the reporting cycle.

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