

Reflection on the achievements of the River Health Incentives Program: 22 years of partnering with community to improve waterway health

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Key Points

- The River Health Incentives Program is celebrating 22 years of partnership with community to improve waterway health
- The program is one of the ways Melbourne Water delivers on its *Healthy Waterway Strategy* objectives, supporting its core service offerings
- The RHIP has been widely embraced due to its simplicity and continuity
- Continuous improvement is a core principle in the program's delivery

Abstract

In the 2017/18 financial year Melbourne Water marked 22 years of delivering the River Health Incentives Program (RHIP). The longevity of the RHIP and the number of projects delivered on ground (over 12,000) is a testament to the breadth of the program's reach and the way it has been embraced by members of the community. Since its commencement in 1996 with less than 20 projects completed on private land in the Yarra and Westernport Catchments, the program has expanded to cover all five major catchments in the Port Phillip and Westernport Region, with ~1000 projects now completed each financial year.

During its history, the River Health Incentives Program has delivered thousands of kilometres of fencing, revegetation and weed control and Melbourne Water was extremely pleased to celebrate its major milestone 21st birthday last year with many of those who helped contribute to its success. As part of the celebration of the RHIP 21st birthday last year, Melbourne Water launched a number of initiatives designed to promote and celebrate the achievements of the program and all those involved. The highlight of the year was an award and recognition event, held to recognise and celebrate the dedication and passion of participants, many who have been involved with the program over numerous years. This paper will discuss the journey of the River Health Incentives Program, lessons learnt along the way and new horizons for the program and its activities.

Keywords

Partnerships, Community, Building Capacity, Incentives

Introduction

Melbourne Water is the caretaker of river health for the Port Phillip and Westernport region. Our works help protect and improve the condition of our rivers and enhance the habitats of the plants and animals that live there. With over 24,000km of waterway within the region, partnership and collaboration are vital to build our capacity to effect positive change. We must work closely with councils, land owners and community groups to deliver on our commitment to "enhancing life and liveability" for the Melbourne region.

The River Health Incentives Program (RHIP) is an integral component of Melbourne Water's commitment to partnering with the Port Phillip and Westernport community as mutual caretakers of river health.

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The RHIP provides financial and technical assistance to landowners, local government, other agencies and community groups to carry out work to improve the condition of rivers or creeks, improve the quality of water running off their land or improve water security to benefit streamflow.

Under the RHIP, Melbourne Water provides a range of incentives under four programs, each suited to different types of landholders and focusing on different aspects of waterway health. These are the Stream Frontage Management Program, Corridors of Green, Community Grants and the Rural Land Program.

Community Groups, Private Landowners, Councils and Schools have been able to access ongoing support and resources from the program in the following ways:

- Provision of technical advice, training and education on matters related to waterway health
- Provision of funding to assist in the delivery of a variety of on ground works (inc. fencing waterways to exclude stock, weed control, revegetation, minor river bank stabilisation, whole farm planning, nutrient and sediment reduction works, assistance with farm water plans and achieving alternative water supply measures)
- Support material – such as website hosting fees, promotional material, signage and other communication material
- Provision of range of informative resources including guidelines for implementing work and river/creek/site specific information.
- Provision of ongoing support such as RHIP staff attendance at community meetings and events, and ongoing contact via meetings, phone and email.

Now in its 22nd year of delivery, the RHIP has facilitated more than 12,650 environmental projects across Melbourne's waterways and has worked with over 230 community groups, 38 councils and 4,700 individuals to improve the environmental health of Melbourne's rivers and creeks (GHD, 2017).

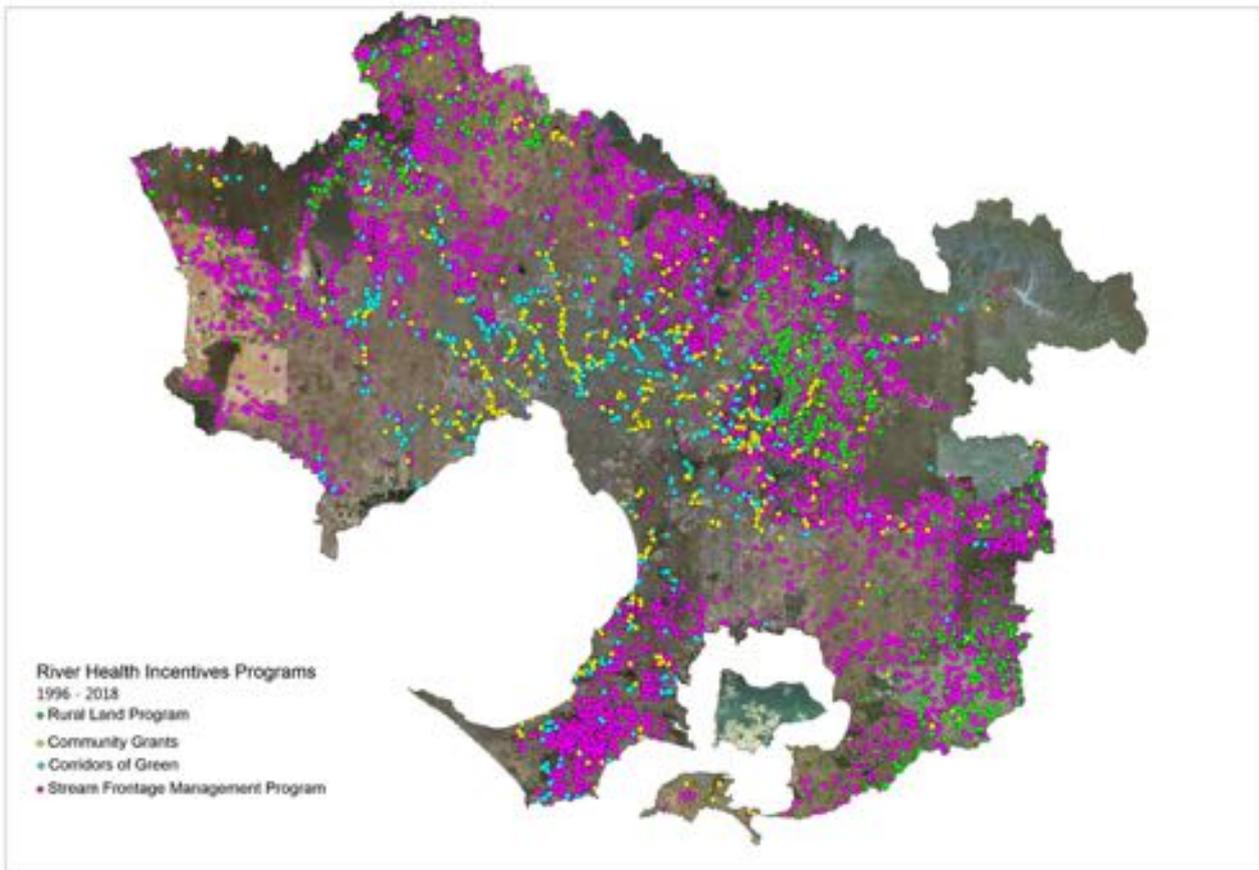


Figure 1. Discrete sites funded through the RHIP Program 1996-2018

During that time the projects delivered have seen many tonnes of weeds removed from riparian areas and more than 3.6 million plants and trees installed to restore habitat and improve public amenity.

The program has also seen over 1,598 kilometres of fencing constructed to prevent livestock damaging sensitive river and creek systems and countless community run events and education programs delivered by schools.

Strategic context for the program

Melbourne Water has three core services to deliver to our customers and the community – water (water supply), sewerage and waterways (waterways and drainage).

In waterways and drainage these services are further broken down into:

- Waterway condition management
- Flow & water access management
- Flood risk management services
- Incident response & information provision
- Land development
- Stormwater quality & quantity management
- Land management services

The RHIP is one of the key delivery mechanisms for implementing our core service of waterway condition management. It is about managing the environmental condition of Melbourne’s waterways to support a

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range of environmental, social (including amenity and access) and economic values. In this way the RHIP also brings to life our strategic vision of 'enhancing life and liveability'.

Other delivery mechanisms such as the capital and maintenance programs also contribute to our strategic vision but the RHIP is by far the most cost effective and it brings with it the added benefits of capacity building within the community.

This is acknowledged in the current Healthy Waterways Strategy (2013 -2018) where the importance of the incentives program is recognised for playing a key role in building stewardship and promoting knowledge sharing to increase the effectiveness of waterway management across the Port Phillip and Westernport region. Throughout the life of the RHIP and particularly with the SFMP, participants are known to recruit their neighbours to the program and have been instrumental in field trips where knowledge is shared (successes, lessons learnt) and individual projects are showcased. All of which contribute to establishing robust local communities of practice. The incentives program is also the key mechanism for obtaining the target of stock exclusion fencing which is delivered primarily through the SFMP.

Case study: Stewardship & Advocacy through the SFMP

Since 2007, a group of 10 landholders along Darebin Creek in Ivanhoe have been working to improve and rehabilitate their waterway frontage together. Each landholder has submitted an individual application to join the program; however the group has worked together using an innovative approach to pool their resources, ably managed by local resident Michelle Morris. This maximizes the benefits delivered on ground through efficiencies of scale in the purchase of materials and expertise.

The group works together to maintain the entire frontage, regularly organising revegetation days and working bees which allow the residents to share knowledge and labour. Michelle states 'We have made a conscious effort to recruit new landholders to the program where change of land ownership has occurred and to invite owners of newly built houses at the end of our section to become involved'. In addition to on-ground works, the group has taken an active role in educating the local community through sharing their experience in local papers and community forums, installing signage, organising clean up days along the adjoining public land frontage and regularly speaking to passers-by about their endeavours.

The group sees working as a team as a key strength of their approach which has allowed longevity of involvement while providing flexibility for each family's own commitments.

The early days

The RHIP was borne in 1996 with the launch of the Stream Frontage Management Program (SFMP). The SFMP aims to improve the environmental, social and economic values of rivers and creeks on private property by protecting and enhancing streamside vegetation and minimising stock access and erosion. During the first years degraded waterway frontages on cattle grazing properties in the Westernport and Upper Yarra catchments with uncontrolled stock access to the riparian zone were targeted. A budget allocation of \$50,000 was available (Smith et. al, 2008).

Following the success of the SFMP, which was steadily growing each year, in 1999 Melbourne Water expanded the Incentives Program to target other land tenure, public land parcels with stream frontage, by introducing the two programs - Corridors of Green and Community Grants. The Corridors of Green program began as a partnership with Landcare Australia with funding support from AMCOR (The Australian Paper and Pulp Company) to fund local governments' efforts in riparian management. Recognising the immense effort that community groups commit to the rehabilitation of local waterways the Community Grants program 'Community Creek Care Grants' was also created. These two programs bridged the gap in community participation by picking up public land managers and community volunteer groups that worked on public

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land. The SFMP also continued to grow and building on the success of those first targeted communities. Melbourne Water significantly increased the budget and expanded the program's operating area across the Port Phillip and Westernport region. In 2001-2002 to the Mornington Peninsula, to the upper Maribyrnong River, Werribee River and Little River in 2003-2004, and to the Bass River, Phillip Island and French Island in 2006-2007 (Melbourne Water, 2008).

The Rural Land Program is the newest addition with the trial program starting in 2009.

Program Strengths

The RHIP has been around for a long time – we're in our 22nd year. This is testament to the accessibility of the program. Getting involved in the program is easy. The program is well regarded for its simplistic and stream-lined approach with the application and reporting process not being overly onerous. This allows participants to get involved in waterway restoration without getting bogged down in complex processes and paperwork.

The Stream Frontage Management Program and Corridors of Green program are open all year round with only the Community Grants program having a specified application time period. This flexibility particularly with the first two programs, allow participants to apply at a time that is best for them. For instance, when they have the time and resources to be able to best contribute to such projects. Application forms are simple, asking just for basic site information as the project is scoped up with much more detail in conjunction with a Melbourne Water officer or contractor (SFMP assessor) later on.

The business recognises the importance of the program and as such funding has been ongoing. Participants have been able to apply each year allowing projects to be staged and consolidated over time. This also allows participants to develop the appropriate skills and knowledge over time to implement and importantly maintain riparian projects - some SFMP participants have been involved in the program since its inception building a robust cohort of waterway management stewards along the way.

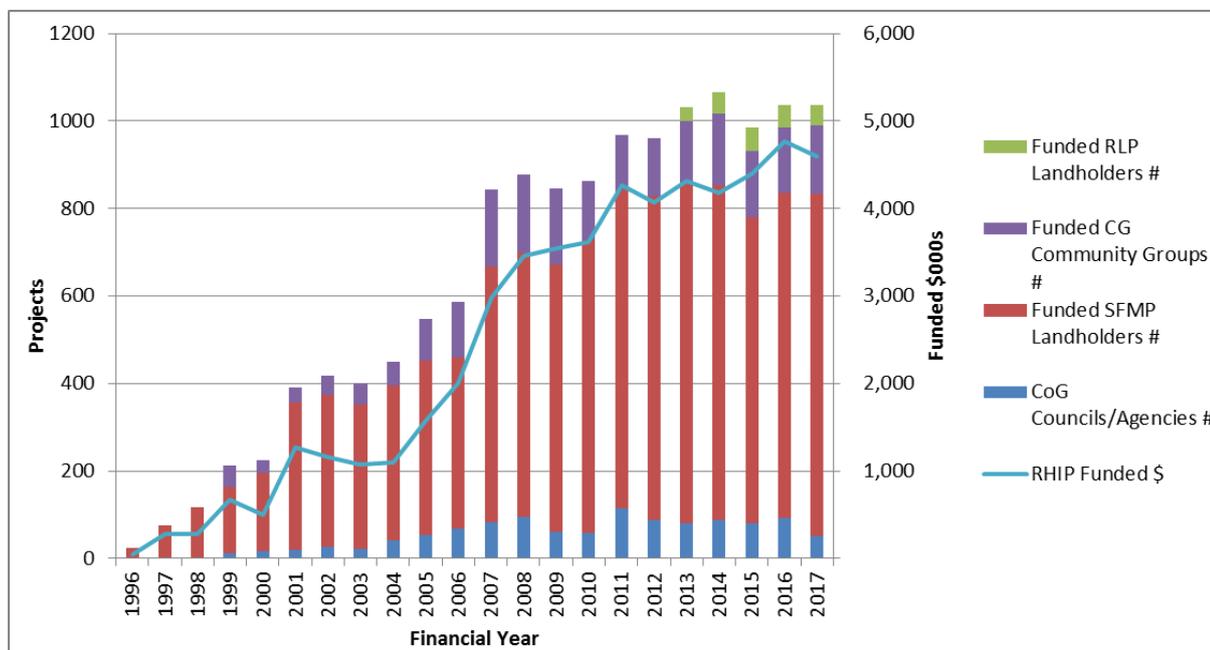


Figure 2. Number of projects and program expenditure over program lifetime

The program is also well regarded for connecting people with each other, establishing local communities of

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practice whilst facilitating interactions with waterways. With the SFMP in particular, word of mouth and peer recommendations account for a large number of new recruits to the program.

Challenges of Program Delivery

Over the course of the program's 22 year history, we have experienced a variety of challenges commonly associated with the delivery of an incentives model, with many lessons learned along the way.

Managing risks to maintenance and ongoing land management is a continual consideration for the RHIP. Landowners sign an agreement stipulating their willingness to continue to maintain the project area for a minimum of five years after the agreement period; however enforcement of this requirement and ongoing good land management practices remains difficult and poorly resourced.

Data management and record keeping for the large numbers of projects funded each year continues to be a program priority. Regular auditing of the River Health Incentive Program's systems and processes occurs to ensure risks and weaknesses associated with administration of the program are mitigated. After many years of utilising worksheets and access databases, Melbourne Water commissioned the creation of a tailored grant management system known as Grants Tracker in 2006 to support delivery of the RHIP. While the use of Grants Tracker has been a large improvement on early administration efforts, system inflexibility and the desire to better service customer needs by an improved online application process is requiring us to reconsider the most appropriate tools for data management.

One of the key challenges the program has faced, particularly in its recent history is the question of how to continue to drive uptake in areas of historic success when all readily amenable stakeholders have been recruited and extension is desired. The program has used a number of strategies to try and overcome this challenge and expand its reach beyond the "low hanging fruit" within our priority areas. One-on-one approaches have proven among the most favourable, with door-knocking providing good momentum boosts despite being resource intensive.

Experiential recruitment, providing learning opportunities for new or potential applicants to observe recommended practices from those already partaking in the program is extremely effective. These experiential recruitment exercises, such as farm walks, field days and other site based learning opportunities are of particular value when local land managers lead the dialogue. Postal distribution of materials such as case studies, factsheets and personalised letters are effective, but our experience has suggested this methodology is best paired with face-to-face follow-up. More recently, social media has allowed us to share case studies, successes and promote the program among the community more broadly. The best recruitment approach is by far the one which utilises a number of these tools in unison. Absentee land managers have continued to provide a challenge for engagement, with approaches via post and social media a preferred tool.

Recognising that face-to-face approaches can be resource intensive, in 2017 the RHIP team commissioned a spatial prioritisation tool to help direct on-ground effort in recruitment for the program towards fulfilling Healthy Waterways Strategy targets (in this instance focused on potential sites for stock exclusion fencing). The tool used existing spatial data such as landuse, vegetation condition, length of waterway frontage, existing tree canopy extent, erosion potential and proximity to existing program participants to identify at the property scale where "boots on ground" engagement would be best placed in the short term. The tool proved useful for directing action, spawning ~\$100,000 in on-ground works with the potential for expanded input data to provide additional future value.

More recently, the potential for future environmental changes impacting the success of works delivered via the program has been front of mind. Sea level rise, increasing likelihood of extreme weather events, changes to vegetation communities and invasive species are all upcoming challenges faced by natural resource

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managers. As part of the refresh of the Healthy Waterways Strategy Melbourne Water is applying greater focus to climate change and we will be putting thought into how we manage this challenge across our programs of delivery.

Recent Program Developments

Melbourne Water is committed to seeking continuous improvement. In recent years the RHIP has tried to capitalise on opportunities to trial new approaches and expand its reach in managing the causes of degradation to riparian environments.

In 2009 we commenced a pilot, then known as the Water Sensitive Farm Design program, to reduce sediment and nutrient exports from farms causing stress to waterways, and ultimately Port Phillip and Westernport Bays. Originally funded by the (then) Department of Sustainability and Environment, the program was incorporated into Melbourne Water's core business in 2013 as the 'Rural Land Program' in recognition of its successes and growing uptake amongst agricultural enterprises.

The program engages landowners in priority catchments towards achieving best management practice across a wide range of land uses including grazing, horticulture, dairying, equine and lifestyle properties. Costs are shared, with the program considered a win-win as landholders receive benefits such as improved soil health, access and quality of water, input cost reduction and productivity. A large part of the program also incorporates education including whole farm planning, soil testing and fertiliser planning, chemical use and other specifically directed educational initiatives. Key to program delivery has been the development of a water quality metric as a quantitative and objective means of assessing the environmental benefits being delivered by proposed project activities. The water quality metric allows assessors to input farm level details (such as nature of agriculture, project area, catchment, land type variable) and proposed project activities (e.g. length of trackwork, measures of length, width, slope, % effective cover), together with the likely costs. The metric performs a series of calculations which generate predicated annual reductions in sediment, nitrogen and phosphorus together with an environmental benefit score which can be applied as benefits/dollar. Collaboration in delivery between Melbourne Water, Agriculture Victoria officers, Landcare Facilitators and Catchment Management Authority officers has also strengthened the program and its effectiveness.

In 2014/15, under the recommendation of an independent evaluation of the RHIP, Melbourne Water piloted the use of a market based instrument (MBI) as an alternative to the long running cost-share grant program. The MBI pilot was delivered in the Little Stringybark catchment with the aim of improving the water quality in Stringybark Creek. The approach involved the use of a tender where landowners bid for delivery of works and a cost vs environmental benefit analysis was performed to select successful proposals. Delivery of the pilot allowed Melbourne Water to develop an understanding of the characteristics which inform suitability for different incentive approaches to better understand where market based incentives could be useful in future.

More recently, Melbourne Water has expanded the objectives of the River Health Incentives program to include protecting and enhancing stream flow in unregulated rivers within the Port Phillip and Westernport Region. This has led to a suite of activities known as the "Mitigating Catchment Impacts Program" (predominantly delivered through the Rural Land Program) to assist consumptive users to secure alternative water supply, thereby reducing reliance on stream or groundwater extractions. To date 14 projects are working towards delivering stream flow benefits via program funding.

Celebrating our success

As part of the celebration of the River Health Incentives Program 21st birthday, Melbourne Water launched a number of initiatives designed to promote and celebrate the achievements of the program and all those

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involved. The highlight of the year was an award and recognition event, held to acknowledge and celebrate the dedication and passion of participants, many whom have been involved with the program over numerous years. The awards enabled Melbourne Water to celebrate excellence in environmental stewardship by our RHIP grant recipients. We received a fantastic response with 57 self-nominated award entries and 60 internal nominations for the participant recognition awards received.



Figure 3 : A nominated project demonstrating how tireless work from the landholders on this frontage at Riddells Creek has seen restoration from what was once a gorse dominated landscape

Future Opportunities

As we think towards to the future state of incentives at Melbourne Water a number of improvement opportunities have been highlighted as key priorities.

Melbourne Water delivers a number of additional incentives outside of the RHIP including the popular Living Rivers Program which currently operate independently. Limited coordination between our programs makes strategic investment more difficult and does not allow maximization of our funding and effort. Investigation of integration of the RHIP with other incentives that Melbourne Water provides is therefore a priority as we look to the future.

A consistent theme which emerges in evaluations of the program design is the need for longer term monitoring and evaluation of project outcomes. Design and implementation of a monitoring program which evaluates both medium and long term outcomes and is able to determine the success of projects in mitigating threats and improving condition is a significant opportunity (GHD, 2016).

Key Learnings

Over many years of successful program delivery we have drawn a number of key learnings, these are:

- Promotion is key: the community wants to know what we do and what we achieve on ground. It also can provide recognition of those who have contributed.
- Building local community cohorts: demonstrates that you are not doing things alone – you have peers who want to achieve the same things. Experiences are shared and lessons are learnt. Networks are created.
- Continuity: having the business recognise the importance of the program thus ensuring an annual budget to deliver the program has seen it exist for 22 years.
- Flexibility: having flexibility in the program design enables it to meet new and emerging strategic priorities.
- Reflection and evaluation: regular program evaluation allows for adaptation to allow the program to better service its objectives.

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Conclusion

Working in partnership with the community through the River Health Incentives Program over 22 years has allowed Melbourne Water to undertake thousands of kilometres of riparian improvement works. In addition to on-ground works, the program has supported and encouraged the idea of community as stewards of waterway health.

Critical to the ongoing success of the program has been the business continuing to recognise the value provided through the program and in turn ensuring consistent funding availability. In order to maintain the program profile within the business we have found it essential to continue to promote and celebrate the program and to utilise participant's experiences to ensure they are enshrined in the program design.

A key factor in the longevity of the program has been the focus on continuous improvement as the program grows, while maintaining flexibility to meet emerging areas of strategic focus.

Acknowledgments

The River Health Incentives Program could not have achieved its prolonged success without the support and partnership of the community groups, local councils, government agencies and numerous private individuals who have been involved along the way.

We would also like to acknowledge the numerous staff members, both past and present who have given their input and support for development and delivery of the program over its lifetime.

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