

## **Wodonga regional waterway action plan: *A community led waterway action plan***

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### **Key Points**

- The Wodonga Urban Landcare Network (WULN) were tasked with the development of a new Wodonga Regional Water Action Plan with support of the City of Wodonga and North East CMA.

### **Abstract**

In 2000, the City of Wodonga and the North East CMA jointly developed the Wodonga Waterway Action Plan. The original plan is now out of date with many of its objectives met and new issues arising from a change in social, environmental and economic factors in recent years.

The Wodonga Urban Landcare Network (WULN) were tasked with the development of a new Wodonga Regional Water Action Plan with support of the City of Wodonga and North East CMA. The project area encompasses all the waterways across the City of Wodonga. Each of these waterways have a unique range of values including ecological values, passive recreation uses and aesthetic values and threats including urban encroachment, stock grazing, historic mining, channel instabilities and weed dominance.

The new Regional Waterway Action Plan aimed to develop sustainable restoration and management strategies for the waterways across the project region, accounting for the community and waterway values, aspirations and priorities as they relate to the waterways of Wodonga. Importantly, the implementation of the Regional Waterway Action Plan (RWAP) shall be managed by the Wodonga Urban Landcare Network who work with 16 different community groups, including regional Landcare groups, school groups, TAFE, Universities, Wodonga City Council, the North East CMA, individual landholders and other land managers.

This paper discusses the approach and key lessons learnt from the development of a community led strategic waterway action plan.

### **Keywords**

Regional Waterway Action Plan, Landcare Network, Community involvement,

### **Introduction**

In 2000, the Wodonga City Council and the North East Catchment Management Authority (CMA) jointly developed the Wodonga Waterway Action Plan (Thompson Berrill Landscape Design). This Plan is now out of date with many of its objectives met and new issues arising from a change in social, environmental and economic factors occurring across the project area in recent years.

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One of the key pressures across the Wodonga City Council is the urban growth. The Wodonga Growth Strategy (Mesh Planning, 2016) states that the City has a current population of 39,644 and with consideration of the designated growth areas has a capacity to support an ultimate population of 100,000 people. To accommodate the growth, urban development has occurred and will continue to occur across the regional City into the future. Past urbanisation practices have contributed to several pressures and changes to the waterways across the Wodonga region.

There are many community groups across Wodonga City Council that are actively contributing to the management of the waterways in Wodonga. The Wodonga Urban Landcare Network (WULN), a volunteer-based organisation, supports and facilitates linkages between these community groups. As such WULN were tasked with the development of a new Wodonga Regional Water Action Plan with support from Wodonga City Council and North East CMA.

The Wodonga RWAP focuses on eight key waterways across the City of Wodonga (Figure 1). Each of the waterways have a unique range of values and threats.

The new Wodonga Regional Waterway Action Plan is aimed at developing sustainable rehabilitation and management strategies for the waterways across the project region and is to account for the community and waterway values, aspirations and priorities as they relate to the waterways of Wodonga. Importantly, the implementation of the Regional Waterway Action Plan is to be managed by the Wodonga Urban Landcare Network and their sixteen community groups.

Traditionally, waterway action plans focus on one waterway system and are managed and implemented by a Catchment Management Authority. The Wodonga Regional Waterway Action Plan focuses on eight waterways and is to be managed and implemented by community groups. This provides a unique project management structure and target audience for a waterway action plan.



Figure 1 The project area and major waterways.

## Development of the RWAP

Wodonga Urban Landcare Network (WULN) was tasked with leading the development of Wodonga RWAP. WULN is managed by a committee of volunteers from local community organisations. WULN have sixteen-member groups, largely consisting of Landcare and 'Friends Of' groups. A part time Facilitator is funded by the Victorian Government to provide support and co-ordinate training and other opportunities for the member groups. An additional part time co-ordinator was also funded to assist with the facilitation of the development of the Wodonga RWAP.

The Wodonga RWAP was developed in conjunction with North East CMA and Wodonga City Council. It is envisaged that North East CMA and Wodonga City Council will partner with WULN to deliver and fund projects developed from the RWAP. The input of the partner organisations for the project was managed through the establishment of a Project Control Group (PCG). The primary roles of the Project Control Group were to:

- Guide the preparation of the Regional Waterway Action Plan development.
- Disseminate information to their relevant stakeholder group/agency.

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Since it is expected that the community will lead the implementation of the RWAP, it is critical to consult the community and broader partner agencies throughout the development of the RWAP. A Project Reference Group (PRG) was established to consult with key individuals and organisations that were deemed to have an interest in what is being proposed in the Wodonga RWAP by the Wodonga Urban Landcare Network. The PRG consisted of members from Landcare groups and 'Friends Of' Groups, individual landholders and land managers, property developers, DELWP and CFA. Through consultation with the PRG, it was highlighted that this plan was to be implemented by community members that have little to no experience with waterway management and are not professional waterway managers.

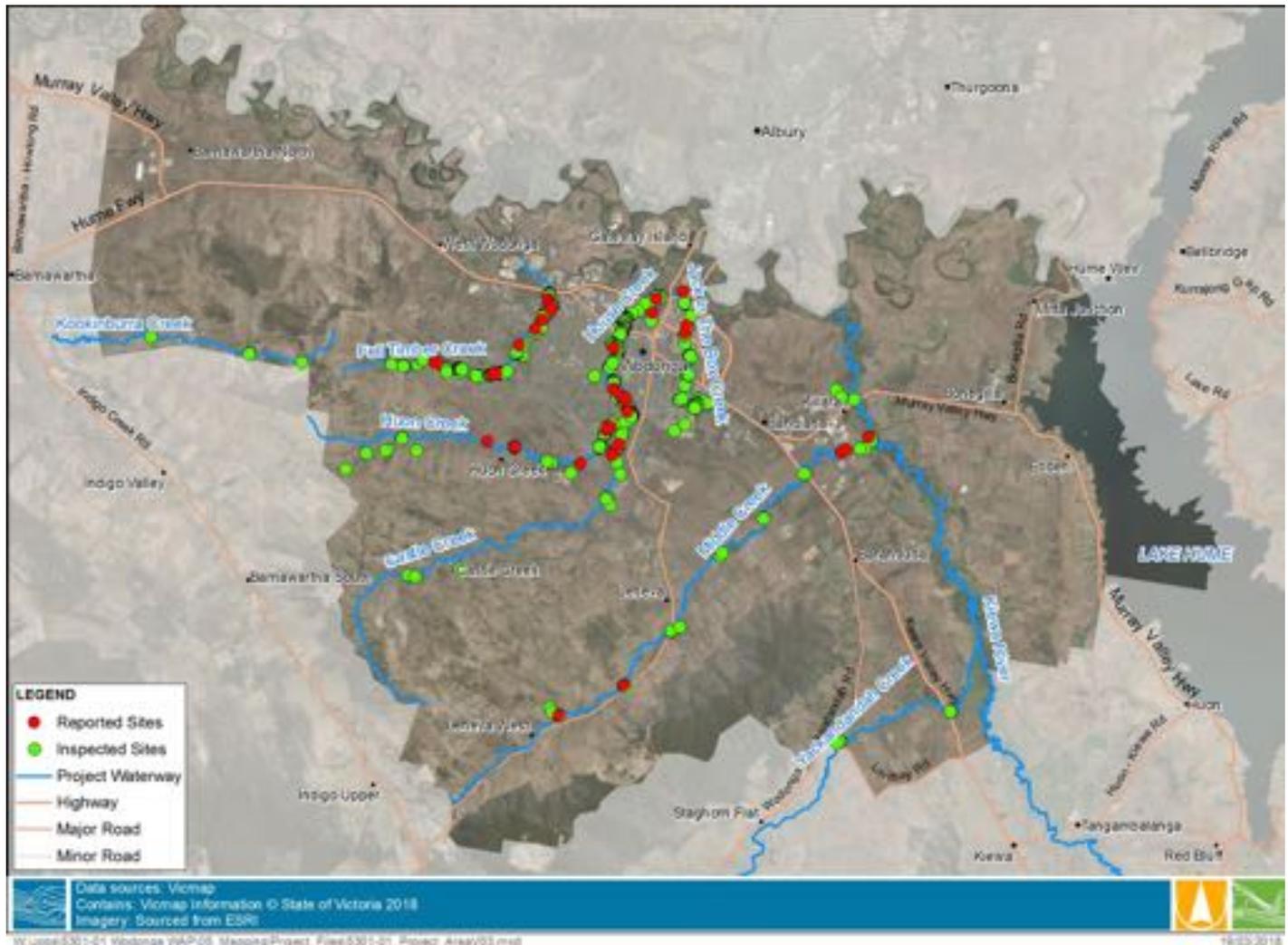
Since the RWAP is to be largely implemented by WULN and the community, the plan had to provide sufficient detail for the community members to co-ordinate and lead waterway rehabilitation works. Many community members are unfamiliar with the relevant partner organisations and the approval processes. As such, the plan needed to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the relevant partner organisations and provide details of the approvals and permits required to undertake works on a waterway and on Crownland. The Plan also provides the community with standard works arrangements to assist them with applying for the required approvals and permits.

To develop the RWAP it was critical to gain an appreciation of the condition of the waterways within the project extent. It was not possible to assess all eight waterways in detail within the project scope. As such, site assessments were undertaken at targeted sites. The determination of field assessment locations was informed through:

- Review of background information including the Wodonga Regional Waterway Action Plan Community Consultation Findings Report. This report provided a summary of a comprehensive community consultation process that was undertaken as a preceding piece of work.
- Input from both the Project Control Group and Project Reference Group.
- Consultation with the broader community through the Wodonga Urban Landcare Network.

Through this process, a list of sites that were prioritised for assessment was compiled. The location of these sites is shown in Figure 2. Notably a large portion of the prioritised sites were concentrated in the urban section of the project area. This is primarily due to greater community interest in the urban areas where the waterways are easily accessed by the community and where the waterways are valued for their aesthetic and recreational attractions.

Additional localities were inspected across the project area to gain a broader understanding of the waterway/catchment condition. These sites were limited to where there was public access and visibility of the waterway network. This limited the additional site assessments largely to road crossing and parklands. Again, the majority of the sites were located in the urban areas. All sites that were inspected are shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Site assessment locations. Reported sites are represented by the red dots, visited sites are represented by the green dots.**

The Wodonga RWAP has been prepared to empower the community to identify and implement individual waterway rehabilitation projects. This was done to so that the plan’s life wasn’t limited by a list of specific projects and to help build the communities involvement and ownership of projects. This has been achieved by providing a range of recommended projects and higher level, long term strategies. The recommended projects and strategies focus on work that Landcare groups and ‘Friends of’ groups can undertake, such as weed management, fencing and revegetation. However, it is acknowledged that some projects, such as large scale weed management or construction of grade control structures will require assistance from partner organisations that have the required expertise and experience.

To ensure the community led projects target the cause of an issue, rather than a symptom, it was essential to educate the community about the relevant catchment processes and influences. An example of the educational value of the RWAP is that there was a perception that stands of Phragmites were causing flooding and sedimentation in some of the urban reaches. In some locations the ‘Friends of’ groups would slash the Phragmites in an attempt to manage them. Through the development of the RWAP, the community were

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educated about the importance of Phragmites in waterways and that Phragmites are often incorrectly accused of causing flooding and sedimentation. However, it is more likely that flooding is exacerbated by downstream hydraulic controls such as bridges or culverts. Likewise, bed and bank erosion in the upper and mid reaches is contributing to an oversupply of sediment into the lower urban reaches. It is the oversupply of sediment that is leading to the sedimentation rather than the presence of Phragmites. Phragmites will subsequently establish in the areas where deposition is occurring and hence they get blamed for the sedimentation.

By educating the community on catchment processes and influences, it allows the community to identify that they should be managing the cause of the issues rather than the symptom. In this example it is better to manage the sediment inputs in the upper and mid reaches to reduce the on-going sedimentation of the lower catchments, and that managing the Phragmites will likely be detrimental to the overall goal of improving the health of the waterways.

### **Opportunities and Limitations of a Community Implemented Waterway Action Plan**

It is expected that WULN will lead the implementation of the plan with assistance from the partner organisations. Having a community group lead the implementation of the Plan can present great opportunities for the community and waterway health, but also present some challenges and limitations. Some of the opportunities and limitations of the community led Waterway Action Plan are:

- Having a community group lead the implementation of the Plan will encourage community involvement and ownership of individual projects and the waterways on a whole. This will likely have great outcomes for waterway health and can also build a sense of community, purpose and self-worth for the individuals that are involved.
- Having the community lead waterway management projects will provide skill development and educational opportunities at various levels. The community will learn about waterway management and relationships between land management and waterway health. The volunteers leading the projects will develop project and people management, organisation and negotiation skills. There will also be significant opportunities to get local school, TAFE and university groups involved.
- WULN are a volunteer, non-for-profit organisation with limited funding. It could be considered unreasonable to hold WULN to account for overseeing the implementation of the Plan as it will rely on the good will of the WULN volunteers to continually seek funding and negotiate with Council and the CMA to undertake works. Should a few motivated community leaders cease to drive the implementation of the Plan, the implementation of the Plan may fail.
- The different partner organisations, including the individual Landcare and 'Friends of' groups and the general community, have a differing set of management priorities. Improving Wodonga's waterways is a high priority for WULN and is a primary focus for many of the member groups. However, Wodonga Council and North East CMA have a broader list of responsibilities. It may be difficult for WULN to get Council and North East CMA to commit to specific projects considering these broader priorities.

## **Conclusions**

The development of the Wodonga Regional Waterway Action Plan was a unique project. The development and implementation of the plan is to be led by a volunteer-based community group. The RWAP also covers eight key waterways. This meant that the plan had to be aimed at the general community rather than waterway management professionals. Therefore, the RWAP must arm the community with more than a list of recommended actions and strategies. The RWAP had to provide the community with an understanding of the how the catchment works in order for them to identify and prioritise suitable projects. The WRAP also had to provide the community with details of partner organization they should be working with and the approval and permitting system they need to work through prior to starting a project. The management and implementation of a Waterway Action Plan led by a community group can present community building and educational opportunities but may lead to some challenges with the long term implementation of the plan.

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