

# Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum

## Minutes of Meeting 50

Date	Time	Location
20 September 2023	1:00pm	Via MS Teams

### Present

Mr Bruce Vallance	Forum Member
Mr Daniel Hammond	Forum Member
Mr Daniel Toohey	Forum Member
Mr Kevin Stark	Forum Member
Mr Norm Drew	Forum Member

### In Attendance

Dr Jane Doolan	Board Director, SRW
Mr Cameron FitzGerald	Managing Director, SRW
Mr Simon Wilkinson	General Manager Service Delivery, SRW
Ms Hayley Taylor	Executive Assistant, SRW (minutes)

### Apologies

Mr Ross Ingram	Chair
Ms Josie Zilm	Forum Member, Deputy Chair
Mr Steve Marshall	Forum Member
Mr Damien Moore	Forum Member
Mr Tom Wallace	Forum Member
Mr Matt Gleeson	Forum Member

### Guests

Craig Smith	Acting Manager Statutory Functions
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## 1. Acknowledgement of County

Mr Simon Wilkinson, General Manager Service Delivery acknowledged the Traditional Owners of the land on which the meeting was held.

## 2. Welcome and Apologies

The General Manager Service Delivery welcomed all present to the meeting.

Due to the committee Chair and Deputy Chair being unavailable for the meeting, the committee **agreed** that Mr Simon Wilkinson, General Manager Service Delivery, would chair the meeting.

## 3. Declaration of conflicts of interest

The Chair asked attendees to declare any conflicts of interest relating to the business of this meeting.

There were no new conflicts raised.

## 4. Confirmation of minutes – Meeting 49

The minutes of meeting 49 held on 2 June 2023 were **approved**.

**Moved:** Daniel Toohey      **Second:** Kevin Stark

## 5. Business Arising

The report was taken as read.

## 6. PRINCIPLE MATTERS – FOR DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Customer Engagement Review

Mr Cameron FitzGerald, Managing Director, discussed the outcomes of the Customer Engagement Review and what it means for the committee, highlighting,

- The consultant recognised that the Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum (SGRF) was a committee that had a broad representation of customers and that it worked well.
- Southern Rural Water (SRW) is looking for wide customer representation on its customer committees and is adding to its strategic approach by creating a new Strategic Forum which will include customers, community groups, government agencies and stakeholders.
- SRW's board discussed the results of the customer review in depth and considers that it is important to maintain distinct forums for customers while augmenting this with opportunities for wider engagement with other stakeholders.
- SRW will continue the Macalister Customer Consultative Committee (MCCC) reducing the number of meetings from seven to four.
- SRW will maintain the current number of meetings for the SGRF.
- There was a recommendation to appoint an independent chair for customer committees.

The Managing Director advised the committee of the conversation at the August 2023 MCCC meeting regarding the independent chair and that the members had discussed why they did not believe an independent chair would bring value to the committee. As a result of the discussion the board and management agreed to maintain an elected Irrigator as the Chair of the MCCC.

The Managing Director requested feedback on the proposal of an independent chair for the SGRF.

- The first Strategic Futures Forum is scheduled for October 2023. All members of SRW's customer committee's have been invited to attend.
- It is proposed that Werribee Bacchus Marsh Customer Consultative Committee (WBMCCC) will be disbanded and replaced with drop-in sessions for Bacchus Marsh customers, and engagement with the Werribee customers through the Werribee Green Wedge Committee.
- An open call for SGRF members will commence in October 2023.
- The next meeting of current SGRF group will be December 2023, with the new group to commence in early 2024.

The committee discussed the recommendation of the independent chair including:

- Members would prefer to maintain an elected customer chair and don't see the value that an independent chair would bring.
- The members have been able to have beneficial discussions with the current format.
- Response times from to items raised during the meeting could be improved by SRW.

Management **accepted** the committee's feedback and the SGRF will continue to have an elected customer Chair.

In regard to the upcoming Strategic Futures Forum, it was **agreed** that prior to the meeting, members would be contacted by management and those unable to attend the forum would be invited to raise any items for consideration at the forum.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
Contact SGRF members prior to the Strategic Futures Forum and invite any member that cannot attend to raise items for consideration.	H. TAYLOR	11/10/2023

## 6.2 Price Submission - Compliance

Mr Craig Smith, Acting Manager Statutory Functions provided an outcome of the Price Submission in relation to funding SRW has allocated to compliance activities, highlighting,

- the approved Price Submission has an increased budget for compliance related activities.
- the Price Submission supports compliance by:
  - increasing resources by \$200k per year,

- productivity improvement from electronic meters which will allow staff to spend more time on compliance,
- new accountability metric which requires SRW to initiate an investigation into all alleged breaches within seven days, and
- monthly reporting to SRW's board on KPIs, and annual reporting to the Essential Services Commission.

The committee discussed compliance including;

- Real-time information from meters: Management advised that there is a growing use of Taggle data to support compliance assessments. While a constant stream of data from the meter would use the battery too quickly, data provided at regular intervals means that operators can request ADHOC reads if a potential non-compliance issue is emerging.
- Moorabool Dams Investigation: Management advised that a community group has presented serious allegations to SRW alleging a large number of unlicensed farm dams in the Moorabool River catchment. SRW is undertaking investigations into each alleged breach and expect there will be compliance action from these investigations. SRW are using drone technology to assist with inspections. The Managing Director reiterated SRW's zero-tolerance approach to non-compliance.
- Bungaree meter replacement program: A member advised that they had received a letter from SRW 12-18 months ago, in regarding to electronic metering roll out in the Bungaree area and inquired whether it was still going ahead. Management advised that the program is going ahead and there is a project team working on implementing the electronic metering program.
- Pricing: Management advised that real prices will not increase from the Price Submission, but CPI will be passed onto customers.
- Current Compliance issues and activities: Management advised that there were no non-compliances for groundwater recorded in 2022/23, but that the year was very wet, so there was less reason to take water without proper authorisation.

A member suggested that there could be an opportunity to advise customers of compliance activities with the annual bill, so they are aware of SRW's compliance activities and the customers responsibility to ensure that they remain compliant. A member suggested that information for customers on how to ready their own meters would be beneficial.

Management **accepted** that there was room for improvement in regard to education for customers so that they are provided with easy to understand information regarding their obligations.

The committee inquired as to whether customers are notified when they are close to using their full entitlement. Management advised that SRW conduct six and 12 month meter reads for meters without Taggle and if at the six month read customers have used more than half their allocation then it prompts field officers to contact the customers. Customers with Taggle are also able to look up their usage and this information can also be tracked by SRW staff to identify emerging potential non compliances.

- Stock and Domestic: The Committee inquired whether there is there a correct way to record Stock and Domestic usage if it comes from the same bore as a customer's allocation. Management advised there is a calculated allowance for Stock and Domestic use that is allocated to the customer and this amount depends on what the entitlements is used for. Management advised that SRW are becoming firmer on the assessment of Stock and Domestic use in line with the zero tolerance approach to non-compliance.

The Committee thanked Mr Smith for the presentation.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
Consider alternative communication methods to educate customers on their compliance obligations including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide easy to understand information on compliance obligations</li> <li>- Provide information on activities that customers can undertake themselves such as 'How to read a meter' that would assist them in meeting their compliance obligations.</li> </ul>	A. BRICK	20/11/2023

### 6.3 General Manager Service Delivery Update

The report was taken as read.

Mr Simon Wilkison, General Manager Service Delivery, highlighted,

- The update on the Moorabool Dams investigation.
- Uplift in Compliance: five staff are undertaking a Certificate 4 in Government Investigations.
- Groundwater and Rivers Restructure: the manager role has been spilt into two roles, Manager Statutory Functions and Manager Operations and Compliance. This will assist SRW in meeting compliance obligations. SRW will also recruit for a Statutory Referrals Coordinator to meet SRW's obligations in that area. The spilt of the manager roles will also assist SRW in being able to better respond and increase effort in other areas such as the electronic metering rollout and Water Sales.

Committee inquired:

- whether there are any more Traditional Owner Licences to be issued. Management confirmed there SRW has received more applications from Traditional Owners.
- when the water from the Mitchell River Water Sales would be made available. Management confirmed the sale will be undertaken via an auction platform through the new SRW Water Trading Platform. A date will be set once management can confirm that this functionality on the platform is working.

- about the licences to take water during high-flow periods. Management confirmed that SRW continues to discuss with DEECA opportunities regarding shifting from winter-fill to a high-flow water licences and Management will continue to report the views of the committee to DEECA. The Board Representative added that other stakeholders such as the environment also need to be considered, in recognition that high flow period can provide significant environmental benefits to waterway health, and that such matters would be considered by DEECA in their deliberations.

#### 6.4 Board Update

Dr Jane Doolan, Board Representative, SRW, advised the members of issues the board is currently discussing, including:

- The board and Executive team participated in a tour at Budj Bim as part of the last meeting in Warrnambool.
- Annual Reporting including Financial and Operational reports, which have been audited by the Auditor General and VAGO. These reports will be tabled in Parliament in the coming months.
- Moorabool dams is significant issue for the board.
- The board is fully supportive of the increased compliance effort.
- The board is interested to see how the new trading platform is used by customers.
- New Board appointments have been finalised with two existing members being reappointed and the appointment of three new members.
- SRW met modernisation targets and water was flowing in the MID on the first day of the irrigation season.

The committee inquired as to when the trading platform would be available for customers outside the Macalister Irrigation District (MID). Management advised that the platform is currently being trialled in the MID as part of a Barriers to Trade, DEECA funded project, but SRW is about to commence another DEECA funded Barriers to Trade Project in the Southwest Limestone Aquifer and pending the outcome of the project, SRW will look to roll out the platform to that area. The Managing Director referred to the more complex trading rules for groundwater and surface water and advised that SRW plans to test the capabilities of the platform with more complex trading rules in a smaller area before considering a wider rollout of the platform.

Key messages from the committee will be communicated to the board at the next meeting.

## 7. PRINCIPLE MATTERS – FOR NOTING

### 7.1 Communications Report

The report was taken as read.

## 8. COMMITTEE MATTERS

### 8.1 Important issues from other customer committees

The Managing Director advised that the focus of the August MCCC meeting was whether to appoint an independent chair and management clearly heard that the proposal was not supported by the committee.

The committee inquired as to the intended purpose of the independent chair. Management advised that the recommendation came as an outcome of the Customer Engagement Review and resignation and feedback of the previous MCCC chair. Members of the MCCC also provided feedback where they indicated that not all views were being represented during meetings. Management and the board felt that an independent chair may provide a professional, impartial chair that would chair all customer committees.

Mr Drew, as a member of both the SGRF and MCCC stated that he felt the MCCC was unbalanced and that impacted the functionality of the committee.

The committee commented that the next chair has the skills required to chair a committee. Management advised that SRW will take skillsets into consideration as part of the recruitment process.

The Managing Director highlighted the work the Communications Team has been undertaking in informing customers on important matters, and they will continue to work to reach out more customers across different platforms.

### 8.2 Matters referred to/by the Board/Board Committee

The board representative advised that the following items will be taken back to the board:

- Preference of the committee is to not to appoint an independent chair for the SGRF,
- Management will contact members and pass on any points they would like raised if a member is unable to attend the Strategic Futures Forum, and
- SRW need to ensure customers are educated on their compliance obligations and additional factsheets and education on how to use SRW's systems such as Waterline and reading meters would be beneficial. It would also be beneficial if there was a prompt for customers to be contacted if there are close to using their allocation and a need to understand D&S allowances.

A member inquired as to whether the profiles of new board members be shared. Management advised that the profiles will be published on the SRW website and **agreed** to circulate the link to profiles once they are published.

The Committee inquired whether there is an opportunity for new board members to attend a SGRF meeting to hear firsthand from customers. The committee welcome the opportunity to meet new board members to a future meeting.

The Committee commented on digitalisation of water accounts and highlighted the need for SRW to ensure that customers are not being left behind as technology changes.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
Circulate link to board member profiles to SGRF members once the new board members have commenced.	H. TAYLOR	05/10/2023

## 9. General Business

The members raised the following items:

### Committee membership updates:

Ms Josie Zilm advised Management that she would be stepping away from the Deputy Chair role due to competing commitments but would like to remain on the committee.

Mr Damien Moore advised Management that he would be stepping away from committee due to competing commitments.

### Drought Reserve

Latrobe drought reserve water was made available to farmers in 2019 and early 2020. Management advised they will continue to evaluate the climate and make decisions on releasing Drought Reserve water to customers.

### Progress on 3/4 Bench water allocation – Latrobe Catchment

Management advised:

- Meetings are being held with DECCA, CMA, GLAWAC with DEECA leading the project. SRW will continue to work with other agencies to reach an outcome for the allocation of this water that was identified as an action in the Central and Gippsland Regions Sustainable Water Strategy.
- it is expected there will be customer and community consultation on the allocation of this water.
- SRW has undertaken assessments to determine potential use of additional water from the irrigators.

### Electricity Transmission Projects and the effect on irrigated county:

A member inquired whether electricity transmission projects have been brought to SRW's attention or whether SRW had been approached for comment in regard to the risk to irrigated land.

Management advised that SRW has previously made representations in regard to the use of infrastructure under transmission lines and at the time the developers indicated that the issues raised would be considered. SRW will continue to highlight the value of agricultural land.



Management advised that developers have engaged with SRW in regard to transmission lines over the Merrimu Reservoir as may be a bushfire risk.

Timely processing of applications:

A member inquired whether SRW controls the timing of application to transfer water. Management advised that SRW processes applications within required timelines..

## 10. Meeting evaluation

The Chair sought feedback on the effectiveness of this meeting.

Management **agreed** to the request that consideration is given to providing a Teams link for in person meetings and that the December meeting is held in person as it may be some members last meeting.

The committee thanked the General Manager Service Delivery for chairing the meeting.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
December SGRF meeting to be held face to face in Melbourne	H. TAYLOR	15/10/2023

## 11. Next meeting

The next meeting of the Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum will be held on Friday 1 December 2023 face to face in Melbourne.

## 12. Close

With no further business the meeting was declared closed at 2:50pm.

*The Minutes of the Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum meeting 50 were approved at the Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum meeting 51 on Friday 1 December 2023.*