

Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum

Minutes of Meeting 56

Date	Time	Location
7 February 2025	9:00am	Online, via MS Teams

Present

Mr Ross Ingram	Chair
Mr Bruce Vallance	Forum Member/Deputy Chair
Mr Daniel Hammond	Forum Member
Mr Norm Drew	Forum Member
Mr Matt Gleeson	Forum Member
Mr Matt Zagami	Forum Member

In Attendance

Mr Cameron FitzGerald	Managing Director, SRW
Mr Simon Wilkinson	General Manager Service Delivery, SRW
Ms Penny Winbanks	Manager Statutory Functions, SRW
Ms Hayley Taylor	Executive Assistant, SRW (minutes)

Apologies

Dr Jane Doolan	Board Director, SRW
Mr Kevin Stark	Forum Member

Absent

Mr Steven Marshall	Forum Member
Mr Daniel Toohey	Forum Member

1. Acknowledgement of County

The Chair acknowledged the Traditional Owners of the land on which the meeting was held.

2. Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed all present to the meeting and noted the apologies.

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 by SGRF members.

4. Confirmation of minutes – Meeting 55

Mr Drew requested an amendment to the minutes in item 6.1 Roundtable Discussion from

The distribution of water savings had previously been restricted to irrigators in the MID and Mr Drew reminded the committee that the Thomson, Macalister is one regulated district. The Managing Director highlighted the water sales held during his time at SRW had been open auctions available to all eligible irrigators, and this will continue into the future.

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There was one occasion where a distribution of water savings was made to customers in the Macalister Irrigation District, and Mr Drew strongly disagreed with this process. Mr Drew reminded the committee that the Thomson, Macalister is one regulated district. The Managing Director highlighted that all water sales held during his time at SRW had been open auctions available to all eligible irrigators, and this will continue into the future.

The Chair requested the minutes of meeting 55 remain as written, and the clarification above would be included in the minutes of this meeting (meeting 56).

The Chair reminded the committee of the process to review and request amendments to draft minutes, ensuring that they review the draft minutes when they are sent to the committee after the meeting, and ensure any amendments are communicated to the committee secretary prior to the next meeting.

The minutes of meeting 55 held on 15 November 2024 were **approved**.

Moved: Bruce Vallance

Second: Daniel Hammond

5. Business Arising

The report was taken as read.

6. Communications report

The report was taken as read.

The Chair commented on the Communications report highlighting the benefit of being able to see the presence of SRW consolidated into one report, as a way of showing the committee the value SRW are creating. The committee discussed the factsheets summarised within attachment 6.1, observing the factsheets provide good, positive, and timely information for customers.

7. PRINCIPLE MATTERS – for discussion

7.1 Seasonal outlook in your area

The members participated in a roundtable discussion where they provided insights into the seasonal outlook in their area.

Mr Bruce Vallance – South West Limestone

- No reprieve for farmers, with no rainfall in the area. People who rely on dams for domestic and stock and dairy are starting to look at options for alternative water supplies. There have been no complaints about bore levels, with the lack of rainfall appearing to only impact surface water at the moment.

Mr Matt Gleeson – Morwell River

- Rain fell at the right time, but the area is drying out now, including dams.
- Discussed the visibility of SRW staff, advising he had not seen SRW around in the last few months.

Mr Matt Zagami – Wairewa / Snowy River

- The Orbost area has had a decent summer, with some storms through January providing decent rainfall, but it is now starting to dry off.
- Working with Orbost Group and stakeholders including SRW to educate growers as to how to trade water to utilise the water in the Snowy River.

Mr Daniel Hammond – Mitchell River and Wy Yung GW

- Starting to dry out.
- Reports that dry land stock farmers are watching their dams now.
- His storage dam is still full, and he expects to irrigate intensively for six weeks before autumn provides some relief.
- Mitchell River is on Stage 1 restrictions, for the first time in a while. Rosters for restrictions do not appear to have been rolled out seamlessly, with customers ringing SRW asking for updated rosters. The Field Officer in the area is working through his first prolonged restriction period. Early communication is important when rosters and restrictions are expected.

Mr Norm Drew – Thomson River

- One person on the Cowwarr Channel has been having issues with getting water at both the flow and timing they required.

Mr Ross Ingram – Mitchell River

- It took a while to set up infrastructure to comply with restrictions on the river.
- Currently cannot use all the water he has allocated.
- Times like this justify the upgrades and installation of dams.

Mr Kevin Stark – Border Zone Groundwater

- Mr Stark was an apology for the meeting but provided the following comments prior to the meeting. *The area is experiencing extremely dry and hot conditions, with a lot of people looking for water. There is also a constant threat of bushfires.*

8. PRINCIPAL MATTERS – for noting

8.1 Groundwater and Rivers update

The report was taken as read.

Management explained the current state of the Mitchell River “shelf” water, with five parties indicating they wanted to purchase the water through the trading platform. SRW are currently reviewing the eligibility of the applicants, ensuring that processes and expectations of customers. All the ‘shelf’ water from the Mitchell River is under offer.

The Committee discussed the interest in water in the Parratte and Dilwyn aquifers. SRW are working through the interest in the water in these aquifers which will then inform the process SRW is required to follow to allocate this water. A member advised it would be beneficial to have this finalised soon, so people can plan and access the water. A member inquired as to whether the “off the shelf price” still stands. Management advised that if water is bought off the shelf the price still stands, but if there is more interest in the water, than there is available water, an auction would be held, with a reserve price being set as part of the auction process. The Committee inquired whether SRW has the staff available to ensure the process is completed in a timely manner. Management advised that they are prioritising efforts in the south-west given the particularly dry times being experienced by customers in this region. Management highlighted that just because someone has bought water, it does not mean they can be issued a licence straight away, there is due diligence required to be completed.

8.2 Government response to drought conditions in the south-west

The Committee noted the report.

Management advised that since the writing of the report, SRW has been given an opportunity to present at an AgVic online seminar, focussed on stock water access. The online seminar is being promoted to the Barwon South West region, however, may be available more broadly. The SRW presentation will focus on private rights to water, licensing requirements for D&S bores and dams, process, and cost advice as well as considerations should people find their D&S bore yield dropping, or dams drying up.

9. COMMITTEE MATTERS

9.1 Focus Area's for SGRF leading into the 2026 Corporate Plan

The committee discussed the strategic focus areas for the committee and whether there are any new focus areas for the committee.

The Chair discussed the change in focus for SRW toward compliance and zero tolerance, and whether SRW needs to look at bringing core business back to the customers, and back to basic's such as providing roster and restriction information to customers each season.

Mr Hammond, seconded the sentiments of the Chair, emphasising that at the top of the vision statement from SRW is "Customer and Community Value." He highlighted the timeliness of action from SRW around the issuance of Winterfill licences. It took too long considering the amount of money paid. Additionally, when receiving information regarding rosters on the Mitchell River, the information had the contact details of an employee that had recently left the business. Previously customers in the area received a daily text from a previous field officer regarding restrictions but this no longer happens. There is an opportunity to improve customer service by providing early and regular information to customers.

Mr Vallance noted the importance of SRW's advocacy for the southwest and discussed the importance of the GM2030 project to customers in the area. A recent meeting held by Food and Fibre Great South Coast was attended by SRW, customers, Catchment Management Authorities and DEECA. Mr Vallance expressed there is still work to be performed by the department to address concerns raised by the committee regarding the security of entitlement being affected by plantation timber. The Managing Director highlighted SRW will continue to advocate for consistent licencing for all water users with DEECA, the new Minister for Water and other stakeholders.

Mr Gleeson advised the visibility of SRW has been low around his area and wants to ensure current focus areas are addressed before removing them. Mr Gleeson also discussed ensuring customers are receiving roster information in a timely manner when restrictions are imposed.

Mr Zagami discussed the need to consider how upstream trading rules are applied and the affect current rules have on enabling access to water. He stated that the government is not listening to those advocating for changes to trading rules and SRW could look at opportunities to influence through/with other stakeholder groups.

The Managing Director thanked the committee for the feedback, and committed to taking the feedback on board, and to improve the area's raised by the committee. He stated while SRW may not always get it right, the organisation is committed to ensuring that the feedback is taken on board and actioned.

9.2 Customer Committee Code of Conduct

The committee was advised that SRW is in the process of developing cultural training which will be rolled out to Customer Committee's in 2025. Further information will be provided to the committee as the training comes online.

9.3 Important issues from other customer committees

Mr Cameron FitzGerald, Managing Director, SRW advised:

- The MCCC met in December 2024, and discussed the upcoming warm weather outlook, and the protocols SRW had put in place for periods of high demand. Spill was not declared in 2024, which changed the profile of the demand in the Macalister Irrigation District.
- Allocation and permanent sales have and are continuing to occur, putting as much water into production as possible.
- The MCCC discussed the Avon Valley project. The view of the committee was to ensure that all demand in the existing footprint must be met, and service to existing customers must be better, before the district is considered for expansion.
- With the support of the Werribee Reconfiguration Reference Group, a business case has been submitted to the federal government, seeking funding for a detailed business case to transition Werribee Customers off river water and onto fully recycled water.

9.4 Matters referred to/by the Board/Board Committee

The Managing Director, provided an update on matters that are currently being considered by the board highlighting:

- Focus on technology transformation to improve internal and external systems, with the aim to gain efficiencies, which will free up staff to spend more time assisting customers with complex water management matters.
- Discussion around matters raised by the SGRF at the November meeting with an expectation for SRW to improve these processes.
- Will note to the board the committee's comments regarding a need to be better focused on customers as per SRW's vision.

The Committee inquired whether SRW was able to fill staffing vacancies. The Managing Director discussed that in some area's such as engineering and ICT, it can be more difficult to recruit, particularly in rural or regional areas. SRW, being a rural water corporation want to recruit wherever possible in rural and regional areas so staff can understand the challenges that may be experienced by customers and the community the live and work in.

9.5 2025 Committee workplan

The committee **noted** the 2025 committee workplan.

10. General Business

The Chair called for any items of General Business.

Mr Vallance inquired as to why a water entitlement is limited to a specific area of land. It was **agreed** Management would take the matter offline but explained that it is a licencing requirement to ensure the volume of water is used sustainably and productively on the land that is irrigated. Management will review its practices on the matter and ensure instruments reflect contemporary practice (i.e. amalgamation of licences).

Permanent Water Sales – Mr Drew commented that he hopes Permanent Water Sales will be open to all irrigators in the Macalister area. Management advised this was the process.

Nuclear position – It was highlighted that an MCCC member made representations to an inquiry into Nuclear Power generation, that he was speaking on behalf of all customers and the MCCC. The Managing Director advised Mr Thomas Dwyer appeared at an inquiry into nuclear power held in the Latrobe Valley and made representations that he spoke on behalf of the committee and customers. The MCCC had not discussed nor formed a position on the matter and the comments made by Mr Dwyer were his own. The Chair of the MCCC wrote to Mr Darren Chester and the ABC advising that the MCCC does not hold a view on the matter. Correspondence received back from Mr Darren Chester's Office noted the letter will be included in the formal minutes of the inquiry, ensuring the correct information is noted as part of the inquiry. Mr Drew expressed his disappointment that Mr Dwyer remained on the MCCC after he made incorrect representations.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
Review item raised by Mr Vallance, and advise why a water entitlement is limited to a specific area of land	P. WINBANKS	14/02/2025

11. Meeting evaluation

The committee discussed the meeting, highlighting:

- whether there is a benefit to adding some time indications for guest speakers to give the committee an indication of how long agenda items are expected to run for.
- They appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback to SRW, and it was a constructive meeting. The way feedback was given and received was respectful.

12. Next meeting

The next meeting of the Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum will be held on Friday 2 May 2025 via MS Teams.

13. Close

With no further business the meeting was declared closed at 10:26am.