

Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum

Minutes of Meeting 57

Date	Time	Location
2 May 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 Kevin Stark	Forum Member

In Attendance

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

Guests

Beth Ashworth	Director, Water Entitlements, Licencing and Groundwater, DEECA
Naomi Douglas	Co-Senior Manager, Water Licensing Policy, DEECA
Christopher Sanders	Cultural Liaison Officer, SRW

Apologies

Mr Steven Marshall	Forum Member
Mr Matt Gleeson	Forum Member
Mr Matt Zagami	Forum Member

Absent

Mr Norm Drew	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.

The committee members in attendance **noted** a quorum had not been achieved but after discussion with Management, it was decided to proceed with some agenda items. The Cultural Awareness Training will be held over to the next meeting so the committee can participate in the training together.

Mr Stark joined the meeting at 9:18am

3. Declaration of conflicts of interest

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

Mr Ross Ingram declared he had an interest in the off the shelf water from the Mitchell River mentioned in Agenda Item 8.1 – Groundwater and Rivers update.

4. Confirmation of minutes – Meeting 56

The minutes of meeting 56 held on 7 February 2025 were **approved**.

The committee discussed the track changes, and approved the minutes without the changes in agenda item 4 – Confirmation of Minutes – meeting 55

Moved: Daniel Hammond **Second:** Bruce Vallance

5. Business Arising

The report was taken as read.

6. GUEST SPEAKER

6.1 GM2030 Update

Ms Beth Ashworth, Director, Water Entitlements, Licencing and Groundwater, DEECA and Ms Naomi Douglas Co-Senior Manager, Water Licensing Policy, DEECA provided an update on the GM2030 project highlighting:

- The vision of the project is the sustainable use of groundwater that supports existing and new users, protects ecosystems and supports living cultural landscapes.
- The following tasks are nearing completion:
 - Sustainable Yields Technical Assessment – release mid-2025
 - Review of licensing practice and guidelines
 - Mapping the licensing and management framework

- Investigating groundwater information and accessibility – complete
- Pilot study into barriers to trade in Southwest Limestone - SRW has released a trading platform
- GM2030 Annual Status update was uploaded to the DEECA website
- The focus area's GM2030 in 2025-26 will be:
 - Release of the Sustainable Yields outcomes. It was confirmed that the outcomes from this project will not impact on existing entitlements or entitlement holders.
 - Development of a 10 year monitoring strategy
 - Release of a mid-project progress review (2026)
 - Continuation of the work with Traditional Owners to address barriers to accessing water and understand what parts of GM2030 are meaningful to them.

Ms Ashworth inquired as to whether the SGRF would be interested in a presentation specifically about the Sustainable Yields Project results once they are released. The committee **agreed** this would be beneficial.

Upon discussion, Ms Ashworth advised the Victorian Regional Monitoring Strategy will confirm the principles and priorities of monitoring across the state, to ensure monitoring is valuable and fit for purpose, and ensure the investment is spent where the best value. The strategy will also identify areas of risk and opportunities and is expected to include the following information:

- Acceptable levels of drawdown without impact to sustainable groundwater levels
- Risk
- Climate impact

While the metric will be statewide, it can be tailored to specific area's and conditions.

GM2030 may also consider regulatory reforms as part of the longer-term program.

The committee thanked Ms Ashworth and Ms Douglas for the presentation

Ms Ashworth and Ms Douglas left the meeting at 9.33am.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
DEECA to be invited to present the Sustainable Yields Project results to the SGRF meeting once they are released.	H TAYLOR	16/07/2025

7. PRINCIPLE MATTERS – FOR DISCUSSION

7.1 Rosters and Restrictions – process

Mr Russell Tomlin, Manager Groundwater and Rivers Operations and Compliance joined the meeting to discuss a proposal in relation to Rosters and Restriction communications to customers. The proposal presented a three pronged approach to communicating Roster and Restriction information with customers and includes;

1. Onboarding information for new licence holders
2. Roster information
3. Restriction information

The committee discussed the proposal and advised;

- It would be beneficial to receive a text message when there is a change in the restriction level.
- Timely and relevant communication to customers is key.

Mr Vallance discussed a situation whereby on the Merri River restriction levels have previously dropped from 100% to 15% very rapidly and when inquiries were made as to why, the customer was told restriction levels drop to 15% and then increases over time. Management **agreed** to take the question on notice and respond to Mr Vallance directly.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
Provide advice to Mr Vallance as to the approach of setting restriction levels on the Merri River, where historically restriction levels have dropped from 100% to 15% and then increase over time.	R TOMLIN	16/06/2025

7.2 Process improvements – Applications and Water Sales process

Ms Penny Winbanks, Manager Statutory Functions discussed the issues identified during the last Mitchell River Water Auction and the opportunities identified to undertake process improvements.

The review identified that while customers are provided information in relation to the auction, the information may not be clear enough as to the standard licencing and auction process. Additionally, there may also be opportunities to provide education to referral agencies around their roles in the licencing process.

Ms Winbanks advised the focus of the improvements identified to date are:

- In collaboration with the EGCMA and WGCMA SRW are trialling a revised approach with the aim of improving communications across and between all parties
- Undertaking an audit of the information prepared by SRW's assessment staff to identify training opportunities
- Reviewing an updating the template provided to referral agencies to ensure sufficient guidance is provided.
- Undertaking a strategic review of processes to determine if there are further changes that could improve customer outcomes.
- Improving information provided before, during and after auctions with regard to the relevant licensing process.
- Case manager details for someone at SRW and the CMA will be provided to applicants.

- Information for customers in regard to the reviews the CMA's will be undertaking as part of the licencing process.

The committee stated that these improvements are a step in the right direction and reiterated that anyone participating in an auction needs to know what will happen if they do win water at the auction. The Chair identified that he had recently been through this process at the auction and is now having to go through the process again when purchasing water off the shelf. There is a perception that some of the Ministerial Guidelines are assuming irrigators are still applying water like it was applied historically (i.e. flood irrigating) and agencies are not fully considering contemporary practices when assessing water use.

Management acknowledged the issues raised and provided an overview of its understanding of the CMA requirements. Management also discussed the opportunity to provide input into GM2030 guidelines.

Dr Jane Doolan, Board Director suggested there could be an opportunity to raise these concerns with DEECA, acknowledging the guidelines are general and there could be an opportunity to review the risk profile for these specific area's. A Committee member advised a lot of the water being used from the Mitchell River is being used to replace Sale Water or water from the Wy Yung Aquifer.

8. PRINCIPAL MATTERS – for noting

8.1 Groundwater and Rivers update

The report was taken as read.

Penny highlighted:

Future of Orbost and District (FoOD) Study – report was provided by the group last year detailing some actions which aligned to SRW's priorities in regard to importance to trade. SRW has provided written advice to customers in the area in regard to how they can trade water, and other information on water trading. A formal response has been provided to the project group, and SRW has been invited to a meeting with the group to discuss how SRW can support the community in the region.

GLaWAC returned water– Licences have been issued to GLaWAC for the Albert and Franklin Rivers.

Metering – SRW is undertaking a fulsome review into SRW's metering plans and proposed to present these plans to the committee at a future meeting.

South West EOI process – close on 2 May 2025. Parattee EOI has exceeded volume available and will proceed to auction later in 2025.

The Chair highlighted the allocation of the 3-4 Bench Water to Traditional Owners, Irrigator's and the environment. Management advised SRW is meeting with customers on 9 May to discuss how the water will be made available.

8.2 Communications report

The report was taken as read.

9. COMMITTEE MATTERS

9.1 Cultural Awareness Training

It was **agreed** the Cultural Awareness Training will be held to the August 2025 meeting as it would be beneficial to conduct the training with the whole committee.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
Cultural Awareness Training to be conducted during the August 2025 SGRF meeting	H TAYLOR	16/07/2025

9.2 Important issues from other customer committees

Mr Cameron FitzGerald, Managing Director, SRW advised:

Macalister Customer Consultative Committee

The Macalister Customer Consultative Committee (MCCC) meeting held at the end of February 2025, focused on how the Macalister Irrigation District is managed during periods of high demand. The Water Supply East team conducted work over the winter maintenance period and implemented a high demand protocol and this work has reduced the wait times in the district. Further work will be completed to further improve system performance.

At the recommendation of the MCCC and after a panel review, an MCCC member was given a three month suspension, given an undertaking to complete SRW provided governance training and write a letter of apology to the committee. This was as a result of representations the member made in a public forum whereby it was stated the commentary was the position of the MCCC. This was not the case, as the committee had not formed an agreed position, nor authorised the member to speak on behalf of the committee.

Werribee

SRW is meeting with growers in regard to recycled water supply. The supply has been impacted by blue-green algae for an extended period of time.

Victorian Farmers Federation

SRW has been in discussions with the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) and wider community in regard to a Domestic and Stock supply into the Heytesbury region. Communities in the area are experiencing challenging times, especially if they do not have a stock supply from an aquifer.

A member inquired whether Federal Government funding toward projects to improve access to stock and domestic water in the region. The Managing Director confirmed he has been involved in discussions to determine whether it is worth applying for funding.

Wannon Water is also working to improve access to stock and domestic water in the area.

9.3 Matters referred to/by the Board/Board Committee

Dr Jane Doolan, Board Director, SRW provided an overview of the items that will be highlighted to the board:

- Even if volumes of water are made available, there are still significant processes customers need to go through to access this water.

The committee discussed whether there is a possibility for customers to trade their allocation across aquifers in the South West Limestone.

Management discussed a potential benefit to collectively look at the water resources available in the area and determine whether there are other opportunities to make water accessible. The committee discussed the review of the Western Sustainable Water Strategy and when it is expected to be completed. Management was advised that a review date has not been set.

9.4 2025 Committee workplan

The committee **noted** the 2025 committee workplan, and Management advised the following topics would also be discussed at the August 2025 meeting.

- Metering update
- Sustainable yields discussion pending release of DEECA report
- Cultural Awareness Training

10. General Business

No items of General Business were raised.

11. Meeting evaluation

The Chair commented that the meeting was informative but due to quorum not being met, a more detailed meeting evaluation was not provided.

Management confirmed a quorum for the committee is five members (half of all members plus one).

12. Next meeting

The next meeting of the Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum will be held on Friday 1 August 2025 via MS Teams.

13. Close

With no further business the meeting was declared closed at 10:41am.