

Policy - Traditional Owners

Policy

Commitment

Southern Rural Water (SRW) acknowledges and recognises Aboriginal people as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land and waters on which we work and live. We respect Aboriginal culture and the deep and ongoing connection Aboriginal people have to Country.

We commit to foster mutual understanding and respect, to build trust and develop meaningful working relationships with the Traditional Owner groups and Aboriginal communities across our region.

SRW's service area traverses six Registered Aboriginal Parties lands: Bunurong, Gunaikurnai, Gunditjmarra, Eastern Maar, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri. We intend that these relationships will raise cultural awareness and deliver improved employment and economic benefits through participation in the water sector.

Objectives

We will work with Traditional Owners in our region to understand their priorities and objectives, to support them to achieve self-determination. In doing so, we will deliver on *Water for Victoria* priorities (see definitions) and the implementation of *Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap*. These objectives have been documented in *SRW's Strategic Traditional Owner Roadmap*, which addresses the following strategic commitments:

- Supporting Traditional Owners' desire to reconnect to their cultural values of water.
- Supporting, within the regulatory policy framework, the economic development aspirations of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to be able to invest in their own future growth.
- Embedding SRW *First Nations Cultural Safety Framework* to continue to build our cultural awareness and employment opportunities by:
 - Be an employer/partner of choice for Aboriginal peoples, known for our cultural safety and commitment to supporting the aspirations of Aboriginal peoples.
 - Supporting training, skills development and capacity building and will promote employment opportunities within Southern Rural Water. Providing cultural competency training for all Southern Rural Water staff, customer committees and board.
 - Providing further cultural training for key staff to build our knowledge of Country, cultural safety and engaging with Traditional Owners.
- Embedding early engagement with registered Traditional Owner parties into SRW's culture, systems and processes placing a focus on partnership rather than compliance, where we will :
 - support reconciliation aspirations and commitments within our area of operation to build and strengthen our relationships with Registered Traditional Owner parties of the land on which we operate.

- engage early on projects or capital works that could impact their rights and interests; and
- engage early on projects where we are seeking the views of other stakeholders and/or customers. Conduct Preliminary External Risk Review for all capital projects. This includes consideration of Traditional Owner interests.
- support indigenous businesses through our social procurement strategies.
- Working with registered Traditional Owner parties on opportunities to access water to support self determination.
- Greater self determination for Traditional Owners on land management decisions.
- Ensuring all significant events and meetings involving stakeholders and communities commence with an Acknowledgement of Country (see definitions).
- Requesting a Welcome to Country ceremony from the respective registered Traditional Owner party for formal ceremonies and events, particularly where they have a wider community interest and participation.
- Requesting a Smoking Ceremony for the opening of major projects. This allows opportunities for healing of Country.

This policy focuses on building resilient working relationships with Traditional Owner groups and Aboriginal communities to support their self-determination.

Definitions

Plan for Victoria - By 2050, Victoria will be a vibrant, accessible and connected community, valued for its diverse cultures, sustainable environmental practices and respect for the First Peoples of Victoria.

Traditional Owner Country Plan - is a plan developed by a Traditional Owner group (sometimes titled in Aboriginal language) that expresses their vision, aspirations, strategies and actions for their Country. Country Plans support Traditional Owners in communicating their rights, cultural authority or interest in Country.

Traditional Owner Nation Statements - the Nation Statements express Traditional Owners' cultural and water-related values, goals, aspirations, outcomes, and any other relevant information deemed important by each Nation.

Water for Victoria priorities are those identified in *Chapter 6: Recognising and managing for Aboriginal values* and in *Chapter 10: Jobs, economy and innovation*.

The *Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap* is an important step within the state's *Water for Victoria* policy – a step that supports self-determination in water access and management for Traditional Owners.

Water is Life proposes a series of actions the Victorian Government will take in partnership with the water sector, existing water users and Traditional Owners to increase Traditional Owner access to water and management of water landscapes. *Water is Life* commits to:

- Recognising rivers as living entities and Traditional Owners as a unique 'voice' for our rivers and waterways.
- Enabling partnership agreements between Traditional Owners and

water agencies.

- Increasing the role for Traditional Owners in environmental water management and ownership via pilots and possibly legislation in the longer term.
- Recognition of water and land management by Traditional Owners for specific locations.
- Enabling return of water to Traditional Owners (e.g., unallocated water; infrastructure project that create new entitlements)
- Provision of funding to pay for fees and charges associated with water entitlements held by Traditional Owners.
- Traditional Owner oversight committee.

Acknowledgment of Country: An Acknowledgement of Country is an opportunity for anyone to show respect for Traditional Owners and the continuing connection of Aboriginal peoples to Country.

An Acknowledgement of Country can be offered by any person. There is no specific wording for an Acknowledgement of Country, just be sincere and authentic.

Suggested wording could include:

If you are clear on People and/or Place, whether an online or in person meeting:

“I would like to begin today by acknowledging the Traditional Owners and custodians of Country on which we meet / I am speaking from today, the (____) people of the (____) Nation and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and communities. I pay my respects to Elders both past and present and extend that respect to any First Nations/Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.”

If you are uncertain who are the Traditional Owners of an area, whether an online or in person meeting, or if the area is still in contention:

“I would like to begin today by acknowledging the Traditional Owners and custodians of Country throughout Victoria and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and communities. I pay my respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders both past and present, and extend that respect to any First Nations/ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.”

Effective date and review date

This policy takes effect on 2 December 2025, replacing the policy approved at by the board in 6 June 2023. The policy is due for board review by November 2028.

Who is affected

This policy applies to all Southern Rural Water staff.

Rationale	Southern Rural Water aims to build meaningful and mutually beneficial working relationships with Traditional Owners across our region. This will enable us to better consider the values and needs of these important stakeholders in our decision-making and actions, and to support their ongoing connection to Country.
Contact	For more information on this policy, contact the General Manager Strategy, People and Culture.
Related documents	Water is Life - Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap Water for Victoria Central Gippsland Sustainable Water Strategy The Southern Rural Water Corporate Plan. The GLaWAC-GEA Partnership Agreement between the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation and the Gippsland Environmental Agencies, of which SRW is a founding member. Traditional Owner rights are enshrined in the <i>Water Act 1989</i> for Traditional Owner groups with a formal natural resource agreement under the <i>Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010</i>. We also have obligations under the <i>Native Title Act 1993</i>, the <i>Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006</i> and <i>Aboriginal Heritage Regulations 2016</i>, with respect to high impact activities in areas of cultural heritage sensitivity. More information available through the DEECA Aboriginal Water Unit and the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council. The Southern Rural Water Risk Appetite Statement. Southern Rural Water's Strategic Traditional Owner Roadmap Southern Rural Water's First Nations Cultural Safety Framework
Communications	This policy will be made available on Southern Rural Water's website and communicated to employees, customers, stakeholders and community.