Small Catchment Dams Workshop Summary Report - what we heard

Moorabool and Maribyrnong Water Resources Project

Stakeholder Reference Group workshop, 3 September 2026, Bacchus Marsh

Jointly hosted by
Southern Rural Water (SRW) and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA)

Facilitated by:
Geoff Brown, Tangent Consulting

Drafting of workshop notes:
Bryce Morden, Morden Consulting

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About this report

On 3 September 2026, members of the Stakeholder Reference Group for the Moorabool and Maribyrnong Water Resources Project met in Bacchus Marsh for a workshop on the management of small catchment dams. The workshop was jointly hosted by Southern Rural Water and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. This report summarises the workshop and its outcomes.

SRW and DEECA extend their sincere thanks to everyone who took part. This report would not have been possible without the generous commitment of participants, who gave their time and brought a constructive and respectful spirit to the day. Contributors engaged openly, listened to one another, and worked hard to understand perspectives different from their own. That willingness is what allowed the group to explore difficult questions together and to find common ground. A full list of those who attended, and of those who sent apologies, is at Appendix A.

The first part of this report describes the purpose and design of the workshop. The second part sets out the insights that emerged from workshop discussions. These insights, along with other sources of information, will be inputs used by DEECA when developing the small catchment dam action plan.

Workshop purpose

The workshop was jointly hosted by SRW and DEECA, and had two purposes:

- to provide a forum for attendees to share their views and build our collective understanding on the feasibility of different approaches, including the potential for consequences not currently anticipated by agencies; and
- for DEECA, SRW and other agencies to hear those different perspectives and, where appropriate, provide insight and reflection on agency considerations.

The workshop discussion will help inform DEECA and SRW's response to the review, including the preparation of an Action Plan in 2027.

Workshop format

Part 1 Warm-up

In this warm-up session, the workshop participants became reacquainted with the opportunities (grouped into management levers) identified by the SRG in the recent SRW review. The workshop group formed six small teams (one group per theme/management lever) and spent five minutes reviewing the content at each of the six workstations. Theme hosts listened and contributed to this initial review of the benefits, costs, and delivery challenges.

At the conclusion of this walking-talking review, participants then selected the themes that they would contribute to in the in-depth review after the morning tea break:

- Data, Research and Information
- Education and Communication
- On-ground Funding and Incentives
- Licensing and Compliance
- Policy and Guidance
- Legislation

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Part 2: In-Depth Review

This session was introduced by Bryce Morden (independent Water Policy Specialist) who introduced the problem statements that were identified through the SRW review. Stakeholders were invited to raise broader questions or issues to be carried forward for DEECA's consideration when leading the development of the Action Plan.

Key terms and language were clarified with framing of terms like "management levers" introduced prior to the in-depth review of SRG Opportunities.

Supported by theme table hosts, participants were invited to freely and openly contribute their perspectives to build on the benefits and the deliverability of the SRG Opportunities.

The table discussions saw participants openly discuss their thoughts on the levers with differing views welcomed, captured and understood across the SRG. The aim was to improve understanding of different viewpoints and find areas of common ground.



Image 1: Breakout groups in-depth analysis of SRG Opportunities

The steps in the opportunity review process were as follows:

- In round 1 review and discussion, groups worked on one SRG Opportunity at a time, reviewing the advantages and challenges first. Their task was to share their own perspective by affirming/critiquing the initial ideas and then to add their own content. Table hosts supported the process and collation of written feedback. Groups then rated each opportunity against the Impact-Feasibility matrix. Their task was to arrive a shared rating, where disagreements or differences in perspectives were noted.
- In round 2, the new groups were provided a summary (or overview) of the initial group's ideas and thinking. Participants then added their own perspectives and focused on resolving some of the topics that the first group did not cover.
- After lunch, a shorter third round of review and discussion followed.

Part 3: Workshop reflections

In plenary, the whole group then sat in circle to reflect on the table discussions. A number of guiding questions were asked by the facilitator including:

- What insights are emerging?
- Where are the main points of agreement?

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- Agency voice - what we have heard today/learning and what are taking from today as we move toward Action Plan development
- What needs to be "balanced", such as trade-offs and different perspectives
- Unresolved questions and unknowns that we need to carry forward

What the workshop explored

The opportunities explored at the workshop, and the problem statements that framed them, were set out in a discussion paper provided to the Stakeholder Reference Group ahead of the day. That paper is included at Appendix B. The sections below summarise the key considerations that emerged under each management lever, followed by the themes that ran across the whole day.

Data, research and information

Participants identified quality information as the foundation for action rather than an end in itself. A recurring point was that there is not yet a widespread awareness of the problem beyond the SRG. This included foundational information on how much water is lost from dams through evaporation and seepage compared with how much is genuinely used. There was interest in better understanding which dams have the greatest impact and the least benefit, including dams that are no longer used, so that data-driven decisions can direct effort where it matters most. Participants also stressed that data is only useful if people can access it and make sense of it, which means making information accessible and transparent and pairing information with plain explanation.

Education and communication

This was one of the most positively received levers, seen as both achievable and potentially high impact. The central theme was helping the community understand the cumulative, catchment-scale effect of many small dams, rather than seeing each dam in isolation. Participants pointed to the value of clear, consistent and accessible information, delivered through a range of channels, including at the point of land sale and through local, face-to-face engagement such as land management extension services. Building trust and credibility was recognised as being essential for success, since support for any private management action depends on it. Education was repeatedly described as a first step that enables other actions to succeed, with a view that a multi-pronged approach to improved management of small catchment dams is needed. This will allow people to know about and understand the rules so they can be followed, and also support improved compliance.

On-ground funding and incentives

The discussion here was practical and drew heavily on landholder experience. There was support for helping landholders manage their dams and improve both water-storage efficiency and water-use efficiency to benefit both the catchment and water security. Participants were realistic about what drives uptake. Finding capital to contribute to co-funding can be a barrier; ongoing maintenance effort and cost is often overlooked. Participants also suggested programs need to be co-designed to encourage buy-in and increase the chance of success. There was interest in linking dam management to emerging agricultural support programs. Any on-ground funding or incentives should be undertaken in parallel with outreach and education.

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Incentives would ideally work to reduce dam impacts while maintaining productivity and water security rather than simply decommissioning dams. Participants noted that it may be difficult to achieve decommissioning works at a scale that results in measurably improved catchment flows.

Licensing and compliance

Participants valued clear rules that are applied fairly. There was also significant discussion about coordination between agencies (e.g. Rural Water Corps and Councils), which was seen as both useful and achievable. Two challenges came through strongly. The first is resourcing, which was seen as the main constraint on doing more, particularly for dams that fall outside the current licensing system and where fees are not applied. The second is that landholders often do not know the rules or who to contact, which points back to the importance of education and clarification. Publicising significant enforcement action has been seen as a helpful deterrent for now. Remote sensing technology was seen as a promising way to identify issues, though one that would take time and resources to use well. A range of structural and governance ideas were also raised about how these functions could be organised in the future.

Legislation

This was initially the area of greatest difference in the views put forward. Some participants saw legislative change as difficult and slow, and a reason to concentrate effort on other levers. Others saw it as necessary if the underlying drivers are to be addressed. A point that drew broad recognition was that constraining new dams will not, on its own, address the impact of the dams already in place, so any legislative change aimed at new development needs to be paired with action on existing dams. Participants were also mindful that long-standing domestic and stock water rights are deeply held, and that opening them up carries a risk of unintended consequences, so any change would need to be approached carefully. There was interest in learning from earlier reform attempts, and in options such as leaving existing dams in place while addressing their impact through incentives rather than new rules. Over the course of the day there was some convergence in views, and a general willingness to ask what could sensibly be considered.

Policy and guidance

Policy and guidance sit between the legislation and the people who apply it, shaping how the rules are interpreted day to day. The idea that drew the most interest was defining waterways by map rather than by words. A clear, mapped definition would give the community certainty about where dams can be built and whether a licence is needed. It could mean the decision is made once and consistently rather than differently each time. Several participants saw this as achievable, noting that similar datasets already exist, though views differed on how much difference it would make in practice as experience shows that the maps are least effective in the upper catchment where a site visit is often required. There was also interest in a carefully designed ‘hotspot’ approach that concentrates more intensive management on the most affected areas, matching cost and effort to the scale of the problem. Participants noted that defining the boundaries of a hotspot would be difficult, and that the rules within it would need to be meaningful enough to make a difference. Running through this was the broader need to balance a consistent statewide approach with the flexibility to reflect local conditions, which vary considerably across the state.

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Themes across the day

Where the group found common ground

- Valuing diverse interests being in the room and able to engage with each other's interests and concerns.
- A shared view that action is needed, and that doing nothing is the worst outcome.
- Agreement that agencies should work more closely together, communicate better, and be clearer about who is responsible for what.
- Recognition that change must be resourced, and that the question of who pays needs to be worked through.
- A sense that existing rules and existing information are not yet being used to their full effect.
- A large and widely supported role for education and for building shared understanding.
- Support for the people who have built their livelihoods under the current rules, while still acting for the long-term health of the catchment.

Where perspectives differed

The workshop brought together people with genuinely different interests, and the discussion reflected that. Views differed on how far legislative change should reach, on how management costs should be shared, on whether existing dams should be treated differently from new ones, and on the balance between a consistent statewide approach and one tailored to local conditions.

These differences were aired openly and in good faith, and the discussion often moved participants closer together as the day went on. The range of views is itself a useful input to the action plan.

Actions depend on one another

One of the clearest messages from the day was that these actions cannot be looked at in isolation. Many of them rely on each other. Some are preconditions, where one action delivers little unless another is also in place. Others reinforce or amplify each other, so that they achieve more together than separately. A frequently cited example is that incentives to remove or consolidate dams achieve little lasting benefit unless there is also a way to prevent construction of other new dams. Likewise, education is a foundational step that helps people understand and follow the rules, good data helps target effort and measure whether it worked, and secure funding underpins much of what the other levers depend on. In some instances, synergies between actions may deliver outcomes that are greater than the sum of the parts.

The practical implication is that an effective response is likely to need a combination of measures that work together, rather than any single action on its own. This understanding of how the actions connect is one of the most valuable things the workshop produced, and it will help shape the overarching strategy that informs the action plan.

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Next steps

A DEECA-led action plan will be developed to improve the management of small catchment dams. This will be informed by what we heard from the workshop, engagement with stakeholders and ongoing involvement of Traditional Owners.

In recognising that this project commenced as a result of the declined health of waterways in the upper catchments, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation provided a narrative (as included in Appendix B) sharing the connection that they have to Country and through continued engagement, hope that the partner organisations and stakeholders understand what this place around the headwaters of the Maribyrnong catchment was, what it currently is and what it could become as we move forward together to improve the health of Country.

While the issues observed in the Moorabool and Maribyrnong catchments have been the catalyst for the establishment of the overarching project to this point, the action plan is expected to consider small catchment dam issues at a range of scales, including state-wide considerations.

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Appendix A: Attendees and apologies

The following people attended the Small Catchment Dams Workshop on 3 September 2026, or sent their apologies.

Attendees

Name	Organisation
Terry Batey	Agriculture Victoria
Jared Scott	Barwon Water
Trent Griffith	Corangamite Catchment Management Authority
Sam Beer	Greater Western Water
Dan Toohey	Landholder
Jane Robson	Landholder
Peter Stray	Landholder
Ken Allender	Landholder/Landcare
Ross Colliver	Landholder/Landcare
Nicole Kowalczyk	Maribyrnong River and Waterways Association
Adam Roszak	Melbourne Water
Lisa Duncan	Melbourne Water
Dimitrios Russo	Moorabool Shire Council
Cameron Steele	People for a Living Moorabool
Kain Richardson	Victorian Farmers Federation
Toby Campbell	Victorian Farmers Federation
Jayden Woolley	Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation
Anna Tuechler	Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation
Michael Browne	Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation
Rachel Brown	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
Anna May	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
Naomi Douglas	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
Geoff Steendam	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
Nick Longden	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
Alana Spring	Southern Rural Water
Simon Isley	Southern Rural Water
Matt Hudson	Southern Rural Water
Matt Cook	Southern Rural Water
Terry Flynn	Southern Rural Water
Geoff Brown	Facilitator
Bryce Morden	Technical Consultant

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Apologies

Name	Organisation
Angela Clough	Agriculture Victoria
Cameron Haines	Central Highlands Water
Helen Van den Berg	Concerned Waterways Alliance
Bella Schaffer	Greater Western Water
Graham Holt	Greater Western Water
Tom Jenkins	Greater Western Water
James Burkitt	Melbourne Water
Mitchell Cunningham	Moorabool Shire Council
Lucy Nairn	Victorian Environmental Water Holder
Zade Kennedy	Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation
Penny Winbanks	Southern Rural Water

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Appendix B: Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation cultural narrative

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Cultural Narrative – Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Connections and Benefits from Engagement

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country has cared for and been cared for by Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples since the time of the Dreaming. It is this relationship that sees Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples consider Country as Mother. The connection that has been built between the beings, the water, land and the sky continues today.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people see water as the giver of life; the waterways, the blood lines of Mother Country. Water is what sustains all beings. As Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people moved across the lands, they ensured that water sources were nearby. This was in the form of the flowing waterways, to the ephemeral waterways that came to life following periods of rain, the wetlands and floodplains that held the water allowing it to soak in, permeating into the soil and also supply the insects and marine life, and groundwater, which could be sourced through springs, areas where it flowed into the waterways or by digging. Water fell from sky Country, but returned through evaporation, which is still evident through the fog and mist that forms around Birrarung and the rainforests in the eastern parts of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country. By working with Country, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people understood the water cycle and how all the different parts of Country relied on water.

Since colonisation, there have been changes to how water moves across Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country, upsetting the balance and breaking the cycle of flows, infiltration, evaporation and discharges. Poor stormwater quality can impact the quality of the water evaporating, spreading the problem when that water comes back as polluted rain. This has been as a result of the changing landscapes with the development and exploitation of lands, the storage and transfer of water and engineered outcomes to remove water from parts of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country, where we still don't understand or measure the impacts in a way that instigates change. Recognising integrated water management as a process that supports increased engagement, this is an opportunity to identify and incorporate opportunities that improve the health of waterways, improve the health of Country and further raise the community's understanding of water literacy and cultural awareness.

With continued changes to accommodate an increasing population, this presents an opportunity to reduce the ongoing impacts of past decisions that have created systems, policies and networks that were developed without the knowledge of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples or consideration of the connectivity across Country. Helping all people living, working and enjoying Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country to build connections that the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people continue to have, ensuring it is and will always be, valued. We have a responsibility to ensure that the water leaving our Country is as good for Country downstream as the quality of the water that we receive.

The north-western area of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country consists of volcanic plains covered by grasslands and scattered trees that supported the Wurundjeri people in providing medicine, food, fibre, shelter and tools. As water flowed down the rolling hills and soaked into the flat plains, it supported the numerous beings that lived along and within the small tributaries and larger creeks of the Mirrangbamurn (Maribyrnong) catchment, including the iuk (eel) that were observed being trapped in the headwaters of Deep Creek. The lands and water moved down from the volcanic eruption points, creating incised river valleys and flat ephemeral wetlands and waterways with springs that supported groundwater dependent ecosystems that supported the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples and other beings as they moved across Country. With green stone quarries supporting tool making, stony rises as learning locations and rings for ceremonial practices across this landscape, the upper sections of Mirrangbamurn (Maribyrnong) continues to support cultural

values through the existing tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country.

As the landscape continues to be adapted for different uses and the demand for water increases as the climate dries. Now more than ever Country needs us to listen and care for her. This is a responsibility that belongs now to all of us with the guidance and knowledge of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples. Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people invite you to listen to their deep knowledge and connection to Country, to help you to hear and understand her. She cares for all of us; we must all remember to care for her and all of the beings she supports.