

For Public Notice via Internet

REASONS FOR DECISION UNDER *ENVIRONMENT EFFECTS ACT 1978* (REFERRAL NUMBER 2020-R15)

Title of proposal: Guttrum and Benwell Forests Floodplain Restoration Project

Proponent: Lower Murray Rural and Urban Water Corporation

Description of project:

The proposed Guttrum and Benwell Forests Floodplain Restoration Project aims to restore a more natural inundation regime and improve the ecological conditions of approximately 1149 hectares (ha) of high ecological value floodplain within Guttrum and Benwell Forests.

The project involves the construction of one large regulator, six small regulators, five pipelines, two drop structures, three pump stations, erosion control works and a series of containment banks (raised access tracks) to facilitate managed inundation of the Murray River floodplain. The proposed works also include establishment of temporary coffer dams and dewatering storage, pump hardstands, construction laydown areas and track construction and maintenance. Project components to be confirmed include the extent of levee works, power supply infrastructure and the location of borrow pits.

Decision:

The Minister for Planning has decided that an Environment Effects Statement (EES) is **not required** for the Guttrum and Benwell Forests Floodplain Restoration Project, as described in the referral accepted on 4 September 2020, **subject to the following conditions:**

- a. An environment report for the project must be prepared in consultation with DELWP and relevant agencies and departments as directed by DELWP and be completed to the satisfaction of the Minister for Planning. The report needs to examine and document the following, for both the construction and inundation areas:
 - i. the expected benefits and ecological objectives of the project, with measurable indicators for monitoring and thresholds for action, including for specific species and ecological communities;
 - ii. assessment of predicted effects (direct and indirect) on habitats and biodiversity values particularly associated with:
 - listed species and communities (under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*)
 - native vegetation including large trees, very large trees and hollow-bearing trees
 - threatening processes (under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*)
 - listed nationally and internationally important wetlands;
 - iii. assessment of effects (direct and indirect) on Aboriginal cultural heritage;
 - iv. assessment of effects on hydrogeology and groundwater quality;
 - v. integrated assessment of project design alternatives and refinements to further avoid and minimise adverse environmental effects, including options for the project layout, siting of infrastructure, management measures, project staging and timing of inundation events. The assessment needs to examine and document the following:
 - consideration of the findings i. to iv
 - consideration of potentially competing discipline-specific management priorities
 - assessment of the predicted effectiveness of proposed mitigation and management measures;
 - vi. selection of a preferred project configuration from those considered under condition (a)v;
 - vii. potential cumulative effects of the project and other Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project projects and other existing or planned projects in the area, particularly in relation to downstream aquatic environments and beneficial water uses;

- viii. proposed native vegetation offset strategy accounting for the findings of items i to vii; and
 - ix. mapping that clearly illustrates the full extent of works and inundation areas, as well as key environmental assets to be avoided (e.g. no-go zones).
- b. The environmental report, required under condition (a), will need to inform the final project design and planning and approval processes, particularly under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*.
 - c. Prior to any works and the removal of any native vegetation, a native flora and fauna management plan, informed by the final environment report, must be prepared for the project to the satisfaction of the Secretary of DELWP. The plan must include detailed measures and procedures intended to avoid, minimise and mitigate potential impacts during construction and operation on native flora, fauna and large trees within the construction and inundation areas.
 - d. An environmental management framework (EMF), informed by the findings and conclusions of the environment report, must be completed by the proponent to the satisfaction of the Secretary of DELWP prior to the commencement of works. The EMF needs to be prepared in consultation with DELWP and include a statement of all environmental commitments for the project, including details of the required content and review process for additional management and monitoring plans to be developed.
 - e. A construction environmental management plan (CEMP), informed by the findings and conclusions of the environment report, must be completed by the proponent to the satisfaction of the Secretary of DELWP prior to the commencement of works. The CEMP must be prepared in consultation with DELWP and other relevant agencies including Parks Victoria, Heritage Victoria, Aboriginal Victoria, the Environmental Protection Authority, and the North Central Catchment Management Authority. The CEMP will document all avoidance and mitigation measures to be implemented for the project during construction, and responsibilities for implementation.
 - f. An operating plan, informed by the findings and conclusions of the environment report, must be completed by the proponent to the satisfaction of the Secretary of DELWP prior to the commencement of construction works. The operating plan must be prepared in consultation with DELWP and other relevant agencies including Parks Victoria, Heritage Victoria, Aboriginal Victoria, the Environmental Protection Authority, and the Mallee Catchment Management Authority. The operating plan will document all avoidance and mitigation measures to be implemented for the project during operations (including the planned timing of inundation events), as well as responsibilities for implementation.

Reasons for decision:

There is uncertainty regarding the balance between intended ecological benefits of the project and the potentially significant adverse effects of the project. Assessment of the potentially significant effects is necessary to ensure their extent, related uncertainty and acceptability are rigorously assessed. Key uncertainties remaining include:

- the extent of potential environmental effects and benefits for native vegetation, large trees and biodiversity values, as well as the feasibility and effectiveness of avoidance, mitigation and offsetting measures;
- the potential for impacts on listed nationally and internationally important wetlands;
- the potential for impacts on hydrogeology and groundwater quality;
- the potential for impacts on Aboriginal cultural heritage;
- the potential for cumulative impacts in conjunction with other VMFRP projects proposed; and
- the interdependency of potentially significant effects and the scope for further avoidance and minimisation of effects via design, siting and operational alternatives.

The conditions set out through this decision provide the most appropriate means for examining these potentially significant effects and related uncertainties, including the development of adequate measures to avoid and mitigate impacts in the context of relevant policy and regulatory requirements.

Other residual potential effects should be readily addressed through respective statutory requirements, under the *Water Act 1989*, *Heritage Act 2017* and *Environment Protection Act 1970* (to be superseded by the Environment Protection Amendment Act 2018 from 1 July 2021).