

OPEN LETTER: PROTECT OUR RIVERS IN THE CENTRAL & GIPPSLAND SUSTAINABLE WATER STRATEGY

Dear Minister Neville,

Southern Victoria is home to globally important wetlands, hundreds of bird species that brighten our landscape and iconic forests and wildlife that are cherished by millions of people.

The health of our local rivers makes all this life possible – healthy rivers support healthy communities. We rely on our rivers for drinking, farming, tourism, fishing and swimming. Whether it's a pristine alpine stream or a modified suburban creek, every waterway brings life, joy and prosperity to its community.

But across the region, we're facing the reality of climate change. As population growth drives ever-increasing demand for water, a hotter, drier climate has reduced the water available. Compared to the historic average, the amount of water flowing into our rivers, lakes and wetlands has declined by as much as 21% over the past 10-15 years. Under a medium climate change scenario, these declines may continue by a further 8 – 22% by 2065. Under a high scenario, by a further 40%.

The prospect of this future is confronting – but it is one we can respond to. To correct our course, we need to recognise the crisis we face and create a plan that meets the scale of the problem with genuine ambition. For southern Victoria, the Sustainable Water Strategy (SWS) is our chance to state how we want our waterways to look, flow and survive for the next 50 years.

Unfortunately, the government's current approach is inadequate. First, because it does not set river and ecosystem health as a fundamental priority. Instead, it identifies the need to grow our water supplies for towns and cities to sustain nearly double today's demand, with the hope that there will be some water leftover to keep our rivers alive.

Second, because the targets set for rivers are grossly insufficient, providing too little water too late. For the Strategy to keep rivers healthy, we need to do

more than play catch-up with the impacts of climate change (the 21% decline we're already facing today). And we need to do more than keep rivers on life support.

We need enough water to let rivers be rivers, treating them as more than just pipes and channels to deliver water to towns, industries and agriculture. The solution is to plan for long-term waterway health. This means we need to:

- 1. Take less water from our rivers**

This means a ban on any new licences to extract water.

- 2. Set targets to let rivers be rivers.**

We must do more than narrowly avoiding catastrophe by barely stopping rivers from running dry. This means setting targets based on restoring the foundations of thriving waterways, connecting rivers to wetlands and floodplains.

- 3. Guarantee water for rivers.**

The survival of our rivers can't depend on yet-to-be decided technological fixes for urban water supply. In a drying climate, our rivers need water now. To keep ecosystems thriving, industry, agriculture, workplaces and homes will need to become more efficient with water, simply taking less.

Every catchment community has a stake in making sure our rivers have the water they need to survive and thrive long into the future.

We call on you to support this vision for southern Victoria and commit to these solutions in the final Sustainable Water Strategy. Let's all support healthy rivers for healthy communities.

Signed by 1,735 individuals and organisations, including:

