

Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum

Minutes of Meeting 52

Date	Time	Location
2 February 2024	9:00am	via MS Teams

Present

Mr Ross Ingram	Chair
Mr Bruce Vallance	Forum Member (via MS Teams)
Mr Daniel Hammond	Forum Member
Mr Matt Gleeson	Forum Member
Mr Kevin Stark	Forum Member
Mr Norm Drew	Forum Member
Mr Matt Zagami	Forum Member
Mr Steve Marshall	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 Hayley Taylor	Executive Assistant, SRW (minutes)

Apologies

Mr Daniel Toohey	Forum Member
Ms Penny Winbanks	Manager Statutory Functions

Guests

Mr Randall Nott	Senior Manager Groundwater Assessment and Modelling, DEECA
Matt Hudson	Principal Hydrogeologist, SRW
Clinton Hartley	Strategy and Business Planner, SRW

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 Chair welcomed the new SGRF member, Matt Zagami, to the committee. Mr Simon Wilkinson, General Manager Service Delivery, invited all members to introduce themselves and provide an overview of their operations and reason for joining the committee.

Matt Zagami – Vegetable production in far east Gippsland, between Bairnsdale and Orbost. Irrigates from bores and streams and was interested in joining this committee as the region is trying to increase their knowledge on access to and trading of water.

Kevin Stark – sheep and cattle, fodder crops in Lake Mundi, irrigating from bore water.

Norm Drew – Dairy farmer and Thomson River and groundwater irrigator.

Daniel Hammond – Bulmer Farms representative, growing baby leaf and vegetables in the Lindenow Valley.

Steve Marshall – Manages farms on the Mornington Peninsular growing avocado's, wine grapes and olives, mostly uses groundwater.

Bruce Vallance – Dairy farmer in Warrnambool, irrigating from the Limestone Aquifer.

Matt Gleeson – Dairy farmer in Boolara, irrigating from the Morwell River

Dr Jane Doolan – Board Director for two years but has a long history in water management in Victoria. Role in this committee is to listen and take messages, questions and comments back to the board.

Cameron FitzGerald – Managing Director for almost 5 years, business seeks to deliver great value for customers and the community SRW serves.

Other SRW staff in attendance provided an overview of their roles at SRW.

3. Declaration of conflicts of interest

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

There were no new conflicts raised.

4. Confirmation of minutes – Meeting 51

The minutes of meeting 51 held on 1 December 2023 were **approved**.

Moved: Kevin Stark **Second:** Steve Marshall

5. Business Arising

The report was taken as read.

6. COMMITTEE APPOINTMENTS – CHAIR AND DEPUTY CHAIR VOTE

Mr Simon Wilkinson, General Manager Service Delivery invited nominations for both the Chair and Deputy Chair positions on the SGRF committee.

The committee unanimously appointed Mr Ross Ingram to the position of Chair of the SGRF until August 2025.

Mr Ingram nominated Mr Bruce Vallance for Deputy Chair of the SGRF. The committee unanimously appointed Mr Bruce Vallance as Deputy Chair of the committee until August 2025, noting that the committee supported having the positions spread geographically across the state.

Mr Ingram and Mr Vallance **accepted** the appointments.

7. GUEST SPEAKERS

7.1 Border Groundwaters Agreement Review Committee for the South Australian/Victorian border.

Mr Matthew Hudson, Principal Hydrogeologist, SRW, and Mr Randall Nott, Senior Manager Groundwater Assessment and Modelling, DEECA provided the committee with an overview of the Border Groundwaters Agreement including:

- the purpose of the agreement was established in 1985 to cooperatively manage and equitably share groundwater resources. The agreement applies to a 40km wide strip straddling the SA/Vic border, with 11 zones on each side of the border. Zones 1B, 2B1 3B and part of 4B are covered by SRW.
- There are two main regional aquifers, Tertiary Limestone Aquifer and Confined Sand Aquifer with the Limestone Aquifer being heavily developed.
- Key features of the agreement include caps on entitlement in each zone, restrictions on issuing new licences if specified rate of groundwater level decline is exceeded and a five yearly review of the groundwater management arrangements.
- Current work of the committee:
 - Review of the agreement completed and scheduled for consultation (no major changes),
 - Province 1 and Province 2 technical and management reviews are underway with most SRW licences being in Province 1), and
 - Annual report for 2022-23 has been drafted. Annual reports are available online.
- Emerging Issues:
 - Understanding and adapting to the impact of climate change,
 - Potential for increased use,

- Ensuring environmental and cultural values are considered in the implementation of the Agreement, and
- Potential new demands for water (e.g. Mineral sand exploration).

The committee inquired:

- about changes to the Agreement. Mr Hudson advised that changes include Traditional Owner (TO) and environmental concerns and amendments to deal with overallocated systems more consistently.
- whether saline intrusion was an issue. Mr Hudson advised that it does not appear to be an issue in SA at this time, it will continue to be monitored.
- as to how SA was managing its overallocation. Mr Nott advised they are managing over allocation through their Local Management Plans, but a recent review considered opportunities to enhance technical assessments so further investigations into the science behind the technical assessments is currently underway.
- as to how new water users in the area such as mines are regulated. Mr Hudson advised that mines would require a take and use licence, and may have restrictions depending on the zone they are in and would be required to undergo assessments on trades, depending on the area they are applying in.

The committee discussed plantation licences and inquired as to whether SRW have made any recommendations to state government for plantations to be licenced in Victoria. Mr Nott advised that the current SWS includes discussion on plantation forestry which is a watching brief and will continue to be monitored. Mr FitzGerald, Managing Director, advised that he has taken previous committee discussions on this matter to the Government, and will continue to raise this topic as the opportunity arises which was appreciated by the members.

The committee discussed the shut-down of the native timber industry and the potential impacts of new plantations on water resources. Mr Nott stated that in some areas it appears that plantations are decreasing, and while he is unsure of the exact reasons, it appears that the cost vs return is not beneficial and some areas are not being replanted. The committee **recommended** that the board and government be made aware of how new timber plantations could impact water security for irrigators.

The committee discussed licencing arrangements in the area and whether perpetual licences would be considered for Victoria. Mr Nott advised that this would be considered as part of GM2030 but he does not know if perpetual licences are being considered.

A member inquired about impacts of mining and offshore oil activities impact groundwater resources and what is happening to ensure that irrigators are not being impacted. Management advised that in Yarram specifically, there is annual reporting to the Minister that tracks and monitors levels. SRW will continue to feedback concerns from the committee to the government.

The committee thanked Mr Hudson and Mr Nott for attending the meeting.

Mr Hudson and Mr Nott left the meeting at 9.59am

A copy of the presentation will be distributed to the committee after the meeting.

7.2 Southwest Limestone Barriers to Trade – Project update

Mr Clinton Hartley, Strategy and Business Planner, SRW provided the committee with an update on the Southwest Limestone Barriers to Trade Project.

RMCG was appointed as project consultant and they have commenced interviews with customers, and initiated TO engagements, developed an online survey and completed a background research paper.

Stakeholder consultation will continue to February 2023 and include face-to-face interviews with customers and community stakeholders, with the report due in March 2024.

The Chair inquired as to how many sleeper licences were in the area. Management **agreed** to take the question on notice and report back outside the meeting.

Mr Hartley advised that approximately 30% of licenced water in the area is being taken, but there are barriers around trading due to trading rules and willingness to trade.

The committee discussed the participation rate, the effectiveness of face-to-face conversations, customers willingness to engage with consultants and other opportunities for engagement and **requested** that the survey closing date is pushed out, to allow for more people to complete the survey. Mr Hartley **agreed** to speak with the consultants and request an extension to the engagement period, as well as look at other ways to engage with stakeholders and promote the survey.

Post meeting update: after speaking with the consultants and DEECA the project manager has confirmed an extension of the survey through to the end of February. One of the strategies to boost the survey participation will be to utilise Field Officers undertaking meter reading activities, who will ask license holders to do the survey on the spot given it takes around one minute. It is anticipated this should get the response rate that was originally sought.

A member stated there is a lot of interest in water trading from smaller regions and aquifer areas and would be interested to see the results and how they could be implemented in other areas. Mr Hartley advised that the team is hopeful that the findings will be transferable to other areas.

The committee thanked Mr Hartley for attending the meeting.

Mr Hartley left the meeting at 10:22am

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
Advise SGRF on how many sleeper licences there are in the South-West Limestone area	C. HARTLEY	20/02/2024
Request RMCG extend the engagement period for the SWL Barriers to Trade Project as well as look at other ways to promote the survey	C. HARTLEY	6/02/2024

8. PRINCIPLE MATTERS – FOR DISCUSSION

8.1 Groundwater and Rivers update

The report was taken as read.

Mr Simon Wilkinson, General Manager Service Delivery highlighted:

- Mitchell River Water Sale was completed in December 2023 with 62% of available water sold. The remaining water has been put back on the self for purchase.
- Moorabool Dam inspections are continuing to ensure that the dams are brought into compliance. Site visits are being undertaken where there has been no response, and in cases of non-compliance, enforceable directions under the Water Act have been issued. Some of these cases have gone to VCAT and SRW will follow the legal process. SRW will continue to educate customers on their obligations.

The committee inquired as to whether there is there a statute of limitations if a dam was illegally constructed. The General Manger Service Delivery advised there are limitations for penalty notices, but SRW's powers under the Water Act are enduring to require removal of illegal structures, and that these powers are being and will continue to be used where breaches are confirmed.

Management confirmed that SRW will continue to expand and improve compliance activities, which could include further targeted catchment-based compliance projects to ensure that SRW is properly enforcing the Water Act.

8.2 Board Update

Dr Jane Doolan, Board Director, advised the members of issues the board is currently discussing, including:

- Next meeting of the board is scheduled for 6 February 2024.
- Items discussed at the December 2023 board meeting were the Customer Committee Appointments and feedback from the Strategic Futures Forum. This forum was very useful for SRW and SRW's annual Corporate Plan will include outcomes from the Board Strategy session and the Strategic Futures Forum.
- The February board meeting will consider how SRW will turn the outcomes of the forums into initiatives, that will move the business forward into 2024/25.

The Chair stated that SRW had a very talented board, but there is a lesser emphasis being made on practical farming/agricultural experience. The Managing Director reiterated the important skills the directors bring to the organisation, and highlighted the value of this committee to be able to provide practical irrigator experience to ensure SRW always understands the issues affecting customers.

Key messages from the committee will be communicated to the board at the next meeting.

9. PRINCIPLE MATTERS – FOR NOTING

9.1 Communications Report

The report was taken as read.

10. COMMITTEE MATTERS

10.1 Important issues from other customer committees

The Managing Director advised:

- there has been a significant change to the membership of the MCCC with a kick-off informal briefing for the new members in December 2023, and noted Mr Drew's contribution to developing a comprehensive induction package for new members.
- EOI has been sent out for customers to be involved in the Werribee Reconfiguration Project, the purpose of which is to develop a business case to supply high quality recycled water to customers in the area, while also provide positive environmental impacts to the Werribee River.
- SRW has facilitated drop-in sessions for Bacchus Marsh Customers, and it has provided a good opportunity to understand what is working well, and what SRW can do to improve services.
- SRW is involved in the Werribee Green Wedge Committee, which allows SRW to have a regular dialogue with the council and customers.

10.2 Matters referred to/by the Board/Board Committee

Dr Doolan, Board Director advised that she would provide the following feedback to the board:

- Interest in South-West regarding the management of forestry framework - Committee asked that SRW to continue to advocate for customers rights to water.
- SWL trading platform – recommendation from the committee that the engagement period is extended.
- Committee has expressed an interest in understanding the impacts of the shut-down of offshore oil rigs to groundwater.
- Skill matrix for the board – committee discussed the potential for gaps in the board's knowledge in regard to irrigated agriculture.
- Shutdown of native timber industry – impacts of new timber plantations on water resources, and how this could impact water security for irrigators– something that the board and government need to be aware of.

The committee discussed modernisation in the Thomson, Macalister Irrigation district and inquired as to the board's view on increasing customer charges for those that do not need to use energy to run irrigation infrastructure, compared to those that can utilise the pressure of modernised assets to run their infrastructure. The Managing Director noted that in previous discussions for the price submission that the general view of customers in the area was that there was not a great deal of support for tiered tariffs, but SRW will continue to have these conversations with customers.

10.3 2024 Committee workplan

The committee **noted** the 2024 committee workplan.

Once a consultant for the small farm dams has been appointed SRW will ensure they attend the meeting to discuss the project.

11. General Business

Kevin noted that the mySRW website was difficult to use when recently making an application with SRW. The General Manager Service Delivery advised that he would provide this feedback to SRW's customer service team for consideration for enhancements to the tool.

12. Meeting evaluation

The Chair sought feedback on the effectiveness of this meeting with the general consensus being that the meeting was well organised, well managed and focused on valuable topics.

The Chair thanked the committee for the meeting and confidence of the committee in reappointing him as Chair.

The committee understand why the consultative committees are important to the board, and it is important to utilise them to inform the board of current issues. The Chair noted that it would not work without Jane, Simon and Cameron's attendance at these meetings and thanked Jane for attending and noted her experience in the water industry.

13. Next meeting

The next meeting of the Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum will be held on Friday 3 May 2024 via MS Teams.

14. Close

With no further business the meeting was declared closed at 11:07am.