

Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum

Minutes of Meeting 53

Date	Time	Location
3 May 2024	9:00am	via MS Teams

Present

Mr Ross Ingram	Chair
Mr Bruce Vallance	Forum Member/Deputy Chair
Mr Daniel Hammond	Forum Member
Mr Matt Gleeson	Forum Member
Mr Norm Drew	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 Penny Winbanks	Manager Statutory Functions
Ms Hayley Taylor	Executive Assistant, SRW (minutes)

Apologies

Mr Kevin Stark	Forum Member
Mr Matt Zagami	Forum Member

Absent

Mr Daniel Toohey	Forum Member
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Guests

Clinton Hartley	Strategy and Business Planner, SRW
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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.

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 52

The minutes of meeting 52 held on 2 February 2024 were **approved**.

Moved: Daniel Hammond **Second:** Matt Gleeson

5. Business Arising

The report was taken as read. The status comments were noted in relation to the information requested on sleeper licences in the Southwest.

6. PRINCIPLE MATTERS – for discussion

6.1 Groundwater and Rivers update

The report was taken as read.

Ms Penny Winbanks, Manager Statutory Functions discussed the Moorabool Dams investigation, advising SRW is continuing to work through the dams bought to the attention of SRW by the Concerned Waterways Alliance, with further investigations being undertaken with dam owners to understand whether there are instances of non-compliance. If non-compliances are identified, dam owners will be issued a Direction Notice to rectify the issue(s) identified. Owners have 28 days to decide whether they comply with the Notice or go to VCAT to contest the Notice.

6.2 South-West Limestone Barriers to Trade

Mr Clinton Hartley joined the meeting at 9:12am to discuss the findings of the South-West Limestone Barriers to Trade Project. Mr Hartley highlighted:

- The purpose of the project was to assess and understand the current barriers to water trading in the South-West Limestone Aquifer (SWLA).
- Overall, the study found a major increase in temporary or permanent trade is unlikely given significant geographical and practical barriers.
- 12 face to face interviews were conducted and 34 customers participated in a survey.
- Key themes from the engagement:

- the rules and Permissive Consumptive Volumes (PCV's), are preventing trade.
- there are significant financial costs associated with trading.
- information on how to trade and the rules, can be challenging to access and understand, including what groundwater is available to trade and the market price.

The committee commented that this is consistent across other area's as well as the SWLA. Due to lack of information, or hard to find information, people are hesitant to invest in bore construction.

The Committee discussed the findings and advised:

- Field Staff do not necessarily have the technical background to provide information on groundwater levels, aquifer information.
- Attitudes and beliefs around trading. The committee stated some of the smaller licence holders worry that if they don't use the water, it will be taken off them.

SRW inquired as to how to change that view, the Committee advised:

- education on the framework targeted towards smaller farmers, and older landholders to try to allay fears that their water will be taken off them. The Committee noted that these customer groups may not know who SRW or the local field officer is. The only communication they may have with SRW is when they receive their bill each year and electronic media may not be seen by these customers.
- Some customers may see their water as an asset (whether they use it or not) and are not interested in trading.
- Customers see the value of their land, but don't always understand the value trading unused water could bring.

The Committee **recommended** communications focus on the current state of the market (including the value of the trade), with a focused one-page information sheet detailing the how, why, value of trading (noting value requires self-declaration so sometimes data is limited), the difference between trading, and selling water and contacts for further information. This could be electronically distributed to customers, handed out by field staff, and added to the website. This factsheet could be used as a tool by customers wanting to trade, to assist the other party in understanding how the process works.

Mr Hartley advised the next steps of the project are:

- Develop recommendations, which will include the information provided by the committee.
- Deliver on endorsed recommendations.

Management inquired whether the Committee see value in the development of a trade platform, similar to the platform being trailed in the Macalister Irrigation Area, if barriers could be overcome. The Committee **recommended** a key outcome to help increase trading in the first instance would be:

- Provide information on the value of trading, including how the trading framework allows for temporary trading, meaning customers do not need to sell their water permanently and smoothing the pathway for trades to take place.

The Committee inquired as to how long water can be temporarily traded for. Management **agreed** to provide this information back to the committee with the draft minutes. Management advised once an initial trade has been approved, subsequent trades are less burdensome as risk assessments have already been completed.

The Committee noted that providing easy to understand, and easy to access information could increase trades, complexities such as daily extraction rates, areas with complicated framework mean there is an increased cost to the trade, which could be another barrier for some customers.

Management thanked the committee for the valuable conversation and noted the feedback from the committee at the last meeting, where feedback was raised that SRW needed to take more time to seek customer input on the project. By doing this, SRW was able to gather more information and insights from the customer group.

Mr Hartley left the meeting at 9:49am.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
Advise SGRF on how long water can be temporarily traded for. Provide this information when the draft Minutes of the May 2024 SGRF meeting are distributed	P. WINBANKS	17/05/2024

Response to action, information provided to the Committee after the meeting:

All temporary trades expire on 30 June, nominally the "end of the season". Customers who apply for a temporary trade for one year have access to the water for the remainder of the year until June 30 (if the trade is approved in November, access will be from November to June, if approved in March access will be from March to June).

Customers can apply for temporary trades up to five years, with the trade expiring on June 30 of the fifth year.

6.3 Metering discussion

Ms Penny Winbanks, Manager Statutory Functions, SRW provided an overview of the requirements to read meters and highlighted the increased focus on Zero-tolerance to water theft.

Management sought feedback from the Committee on the benefits of reading all meters twice per year as documented in Local Management Plans. The committee advised:

- Meter reading time is a chance to speak with a SRW representative and is a great time to talk about other matters, hear what is going on at SRW and in the area. Some Field Officers let customers know when they will be at a property and the Member stated they appreciated the notice.
- It could be a great time to distribute information packs, like water trading.
- Field Staff reading meters demystifies the process, so people see there is active management of the asset they pay for.
- A Member advised that they don't really see the Field Officer but knows who they are and will phone if he needs information or has an issue.
- Suggested SRW provide information for customers to be able to read their own meters, to ensure they can assess their own compliance in between meter reads by SRW.
- Waterline can be difficult to navigate at times.
- Meter maintenance is an issue in some areas due to iron bacteria, and some customers don't know whose responsibility it is to maintain the meters. In some areas where there is an issue with iron bacteria also have Taggle installed, a meter may stop working. SRW need to ensure there are arrangements in place to ensure people are not using too much water.
- If SRW decrease the number of visits to properties other compliance issues (second pipe etc) may be missed.
- Attending properties for a meter read is a less formal opportunity for customers to engage with SRW, rather than having to book an appointment to speak to someone.

The Committee asked SRW to consider the value of automated meter reads, as staff still need to attend to ensure other compliance issues are not taking place.

It was agreed that the relationship between customers and Field Officers and the information they can provide, is important and SRW still need to make sure points of interaction are maintained, ensure there is a regular touchpoint between customers and SRW, and customers know who the field officer in their area is. SRW compliance interactions are seen as an important connection to customers and Management should keep this in mind as zero-tolerance activities increase.

The Committee discussed the obligation of customers providing clear and safe access to meters and SRW will work to locate meters in a place that is accessible.

6.4 Board Update

Dr Jane Doolan, Board Director, SRW provided an update of items discussed at the last board meeting:

- SRW is required to provide a government dividend and are working through how to pay this within the current Price Submission. The Committee inquired what this means, with the Managing Director advising that in May 2023 budget, the Government required all water corporations to pay a dividend to repay the costs associated with COVID response. The Government has asked for 1% of

operating costs year on year to be repaid by efficiencies. Management are confident SRW can meet this.

- Briefing on Environmental Duty of Care – SRW as an organisation have a general duty of care and are working through what this will look like across the water sector.
- The board has picked up issues raised by this committee and have a planned briefing from DEECA regarding how forestry is being considered as part of the water allocation framework.
- The board have undertaken a skills discussion, including reviewing the board member summary on the website, and is working to include references to a wider set of skills in the summary rather than just corporate related skills. The board is also developing a skills matrix to further identify the skills required across the board table.

7. PRINCIPLE MATTERS – FOR NOTING

7.1 Communications Report

The report was taken as read.

8. COMMITTEE MATTERS

8.1 Important issues from other customer committees

Mr Cameron FitzGerald, Managing Director, SRW advised:

- SRW are working with Werribee customers as part of the Werribee Re-configuration project, which looks at replacing river water with high quality recycled water. There is a strong view from the reference group, that if high-quality recycled water can be supplied, it would be a great thing. A 10-point plan has been developed and Melbourne Water will attend the next meeting to talk about how to move forward with the project.
- Significant dry period late in the season in the Macalister Irrigation Area, with high use and 100% HRWS for customers, meaning customers wanted to order large volumes of water at one time. A high-demand protocol was developed to deliver these high volumes of water to customers. This meant taking the system out of automation to run more water through it, and while this means there was more outfalls from channels, customers were able to receive their water in shorter timeframes than if the system was left in automation. A review has been implemented into how to operate the system better to ensure customers are able to access the volumes of water they want in a fair way for all customers.

A member inquired as to how the Place of Take reforms could work to ensure that all customers are able to access their same portion of water.

Management advised that any changes to the way water is delivered will require significant consultation with customers. A conversation was had with the MCCC around the automated system with feedback being that the automated system is great most of the time. From this conversation, the high demand protocol was developed which gives planners back control of the system in periods of high demand, to try to fit more orders in.

8.2 Matters referred to/by the Board/Board Committee

Dr Doolan, Board Director advised that the following feedback would be provided to the board:

- Outcomes of what limits trade in SWLA and what can be practically and sensibly done to promote trade.
- From the metering discussion, the Committee noted the importance and benefits of the personal interactions with field staff that come from metering activities, which SRW need to appreciate and take on board if metering is reduced.
- The SGRF noted their appreciation of the attention the board has given to the skills matrix after the discussion at a previous meeting.

8.3 2024 Committee workplan

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

Management highlighted the Small Farm Dams project is a Sustainable Water Strategy action item, and SRW will invite a representative from the project to attend the next meeting to discuss the project and hear from the committee on their views.

Mr Russell Tomlin, Manager Operations and Compliance will attend the next meeting to discuss compliance and enforcement activities being undertaken at SRW.

9. General Business

The Chair called for any items of General Business, with none raised.

10. Meeting evaluation

The Chair sought feedback on the effectiveness of this meeting.

The Chair thanked Management for taking on the Committee's feedback regarding SWLA Barriers to Trade Project

11. Next meeting

The next meeting of the Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum will be held on Friday 2 August 2024 via MS Teams.

12. Close

With no further business the meeting was declared closed at 10:37am.