

Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum

Minutes of Meeting 54

Date	Time	Location
2 August 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 Daniel Toohey	Forum Member
Mr Kevin Stark	Forum Member
Mr Matt Zagami	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, SRW
Ms Hayley Taylor	Executive Assistant, SRW (minutes)

Apologies

Mr Steven Marshall	Forum Member
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Guests

Mr Matthew Hudson	Principal Hydrogeologist, SRW
Mr Russell Tomlin	Manager Groundwater and Rivers Operations and Compliance, 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.

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 53

The minutes of meeting 53 held on 3 May 2024 were **approved**.

Moved: Matt Gleeson

Second: Norm Drew

5. Business Arising

The report was taken as read. The status comments were noted, and Management confirmed the Strategic Futures forum would be going ahead in 2024, but in a different format to 2023. The committee will be advised of the details once they have been confirmed.

6. PRINCIPLE MATTERS – for discussion

6.1 Groundwater and Rivers update

The report was taken as read.

The committee inquired about the following items:

Moorabool Dams investigation.

Management provided clarity in regard to how different enforcement notices relate to sections of the Water Act and how they are issued when there are contraventions of the Water Act.

The committee inquired as to how the dams were identified. Management advised the People for a Living Moorabool (PaLM) provided the results of an investigation undertaken by the group identifying dams on waterways in the region. A focus of the group is the management of water in the area and ensuring that dams are compliant.

SRW has worked through the list of all of the dams, identifying dams that were domestic and stock, dams, instances where SRW had received the appropriate applications and dams that were potentially non-compliant and required further investigation. From those dams that required further investigation SRW has worked diligently through the list, to determine what further action is required and has issued enforcement notices where breaches of the Water Act are found.

SRW's focus on compliance includes a fair, appropriate and clear application of the Water Act. To enable this SRW now has two managers to provide separation between SRW's role in compliance/enforcement and licencing/application assessment activities.

South-West Limestone Barriers to Trade project

SRW is working with the consultant to finalise the report, and a range of recommendations have been endorsed by the SRW Executive Team, which will be actioned immediately. These include actions improvement in communications and engagement on water trading and the potential trial of a trading platform. Management acknowledged the current dry conditions in the south-west and SRW is focusing on providing assistance to those customers, including linking them with other services, and working with customers in the area to overcome barriers to access water.

Traditional Owner applications

SRW is working with GLaWAC to assess applications for the Albert and Franklin Rivers. An EOI will be undertaken for irrigators or other consumptive users to understand requirements for water use from all potential users, as required by the Water Act.

Mitchell River Management Plan Project

The Chair advised he and another forum member had been approached to provide input into the project and expressed that SRW needed to consult with all customers affected by the project, not just large irrigators on the Mitchell River. The members approached advised they do not have a view on who does or doesn't utilise Sales Water and don't want to assume to know how other customers use the water. The Managing Director acknowledged to comments, and advised SRW will work through the practical issues and what a transition could look like if there is a change to current practice and will ensure the wording of draft report is reflective of conversations with stakeholders.

6.2 Compliance and Enforcement

Mr Russell Tomlin, Manager Groundwater and Rivers Operations and Compliance provided a presentation on compliance and enforcement activities undertaken in the last 12 months, highlighting:

- End of season meter reading activities have concluded with a number of instances of overuse detected. Where there were cases of overuse, a warning letter was issued and SRW engaged with customers to provide education on obligations to comply with licence conditions.
- SRW's Zero Tolerance to water theft approach and enforcement action available to SRW to address instances of non-compliance, and the importance of education and providing information to customers on their obligations.

- Building capacity across the organisation in regard to staff's investigative and enforcement capacity, including training, best practice note taking and introduction of tools to support staff.

The attendees discussed messaging and communications to customers regarding Zero Tolerance including:

- customers feel that there is a bit of a grey regarding obligations and SRW need to continue with the strong messaging regarding zero tolerance to ensure customers have every opportunity to be aware of their obligations.
- AMR data logging devices – SRW is undertaking work to review the project to ensure the most appropriate devices are installed, as through manual reading, some issues have been identified regarding data quality, especially in remote areas. The members encouraged SRW to look at the installation of the devices to ensure they are stable and well attached to the meter. Members advised some irrigators had reported some new meters are running faster than previous meters and Management advised SRW staff can come out on site and undertake maintenance to ensure the meter is calibrated correctly. All new meters are AS4747 compliant meters and are under warranty.
- Education regarding meter reading (including how customer can read their own meters) or mid-year updates on usage to help licence holders remain compliant would be beneficial. The committee suggested this could include emails when customers have used a certain percentage of their allocation, for example an email notification at 70% usage would give customers time to trade if they expected they would need more water or to dry off land. The mySRW website currently does not provide this service. Ideally customers would like to be able to use technology to be able to monitor this usage in a meaningful way. Management acknowledged that as part of the engagement plan SRW need to consider how information can be communicated to customers in a meaningful way. The committee expressed that customers value speaking with and seeing field officers, reporting positive interactions with SRW staff, and these are very beneficial interactions which should not be lost with the introduction of digital meter reads.

Mr Tomlin provided an overview on the focus areas for the next 12 months:

- Catchment based investigation to commence in the Mornington Peninsula.
- Potentially Hazardous Dams inspections to be completed by 30 September 2024.
- Expand compliance and enforcement across the whole business.
- Education – engage with customers and create education material to support customers with complying with their licence conditions.
- Meter reading improvements.

The committee discussed the focus area and provided the following commentary:

- It is positive that customers are being supported and educated in how to trade.
- It is the responsibility of water users to ensure they do not go over their limits, and trade needs to occur before overuse occurs Trade is not a solution to bring licence holders back into compliance. Education materials should include:
 - when to trade,
 - how to manage their water, and
 - what options are available to customers that want to access more water.
- there were no other catchments identified by the committee where a catchment based investigation should be prioritised.

The committee inquired who customers should contact regarding trade options. Management advised customers should contact their local field officer in the first instance as they will usually know who has water to trade and whether the trade is allowed under policy.

The committee inquired why the Water Register was not accessible. Management advised the public can search some details in the register, such as licences within a catchment region and for more detailed information people can apply for an Information Statement, but Field Staff can bridge that information gap for customers looking to trade, while maintaining appropriate privacy controls.

Management inquired whether there was any appetite from customers to undertake their own mid-year reads and provide the reading to SRW. The committee advised there was no appetite for this, highlighting issues around data integrity, and if SRW undertakes the reads, it is less likely they would be contested. The committee highlighted it would be helpful if customers were able to access their water usage online and SRW could consider undertaking mid-season reads, rather than mid-year reads as it could provide customers with a more accurate account of their water usage during the season.

The committee thanked Mr Tomlin for the presentation.

6.3 Small Farm Dams – Project update

Mr Matthew Hudson, Principal Hydrogeologist, SRW joined the meeting at 10:26am and provided an update on the Small Farms Dam project highlighting:

- This is a DEECA funded project which originated from the Central Gippsland Sustainable Water Strategy (CGSWS), action 4-13: Review of water resource risk in small, dry, peri-urban catchment. project focus on the upper Maribyrnong and upper Moorabool catchments, but the recommendations may be relevant to other catchments.
- Peri Urban catchments are facing unique challenges such as:
 - Changing land use

- Climate change
- Small catchment unlicensed dams
- Stock and domestic – unlicensed bores and surface water extraction
- Licensed take
- SRW have appointed Alluvium and HARC to deliver the project, with the project to:
 - Identify the extent and impact of unlicensed take
 - Engage with community and stakeholder groups
 - Assess the risk to key catchment values including cultural, environmental and economic factors.
- Timeframes:
 - The project is expected to be completed by December 2025.
 - A stakeholder reference group will be established by September 2024, with a communication and engagement plan currently being developed which will aim to ensure all stakeholders have an opportunity to be represented as part of the project.

The committee thanked Mr Hudson for the presentation and encouraged SRW to be aware of unintended consequences and how they could impact water users, and they look forward to seeing the data from the project.

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:

The recent MCCC meeting focused on:

- flood management and improving communications with customers. Mr Drew advised there has been positive interactions with SRW's new Manager Emergency Planning and Risk and The Irrigator Reference Group of which Mr Drew is a member, had discussed the floods including the importance of consistent messaging on flows, and river heights above the dams, which is consistent with feedback from the MCCC. The sentiment from both groups is for SRW to move to technology based communications to expand messaging and ensuring there is a single source of information.
- In the Thomson Macalister Irrigation Area, there was a period of high demand from January 2024 due to 100% entitlement in mid-January. This meant customers had their full entitlement available, and therefore everyone wanted all their water at once. The MCCC and SRW talked at length regarding the

protocols implemented to ensure fair access to water, and a project is now underway that is looking out how to best manage the operation of the system during periods of high demand.

Werribee Reconfiguration Project– SRW is meeting with customers and stakeholders to work through this project and explore options of providing better quality recycled water to the Werribee district. Customers on the committee are engaged with the project and will continue to work with the group to further develop the idea.

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:

- SRW is encouraged to look at how trading is supported in the South-West, especially considering the current dry conditions.
- Mitchell River Management Review needs to ensure there are options for engagement with all irrigations to be consulted as part of the project.
- There is strong support from the committee in regard to SRW's Zero Tolerance approach to water theft. The committee expressed to SRW, the importance of education, providing usage information to customers, encourage customers to monitor their own usage, to ensure they remain compliant. To support this the mySRW website needs a 'tune-up' to ensure information provided to customers is current.
- Face to face engagement with field officers is very important to customers.
- Education, including water trading should be a focus, and education will support customers to remain compliant.
- There is ongoing interest in the Small Farms Dams Project, including potential outcomes regarding policy responses.

Dr Doolan advised that the board will continue to advocate for a robust, fair and equitable sharing of water resources for all water users including the forestry sector. A member advised water run-off is drying up as plantations are absorbing water before it reaches the river. Landholders are concerned they will be impacted rapidly if there isn't regulation, and it is already starting to effect users. The member commented plantations have a far greater effect on catchments that farm dams.

8.3 2024 Committee workplan

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

9. General Business

The Chair called for any items of General Business.

Contact details for customers

The committee inquired whether Waterline usernames could be changed to email addresses and whether a request for updated contact information could be sent with

the bills to prompt customers to provide email addresses to SRW. The committee expressed that they would like to see all communications from SRW to be distributed electronically, including bills. Management advised that an E-billing solution is imminent and a challenge for SRW has been ensuring customer privacy is maintained and this has been worked through as part of the e-billing project.

Use of consultants

It was expressed that some members would like to see SRW have the internal capability to undertake projects and there is some concern that consultants do not fully understand the issues of SRW customers.

Torquay Dam

Management advised the dam is fully decommissioned as it was deemed an unacceptable risk to public safety. This work has meant that SRW has reviewed other dams near developments and has undertaken action to decommission one other dam that was been deemed an unacceptable risk to public safety.

Mitchell River Winter Fill Auction and Licencing

A member advised they, and some other customers had not received their licence from the Auction. Management confirmed that the majority of licences have been issued, with a handful remaining were SRW is working with the CMA to ensure the appropriate plans have been submitted. The committee encouraged SRW to learn from this procedural issue and ensure the process is clear for any future sales as it was reported that this is the second time delays have occurred when issuing these types of licences. Management **agreed** to follow-up on the status of outstanding licences from this auction.

2025 Corporate Plan

Management advised the 2025 Corporate Plan has been accepted and **confirmed** a link will be sent to the committee with the minutes.

South-West Limestone

A member advised landholders in the area want to reduce red tape regarding putting farm dams in and some landholder still want to put dams on water ways.

Action	Action Officer	Due Date
Provide the link to the 2025 Corporate Plan to members when the draft minutes of the August 2024 SGRF meeting are distributed	H. TAYLOR	16/08/2024
Follow-up status of outstanding licences from the Mitchell River Winterfill Auction.	P. WINBANKS	16/08/2024

10. Meeting evaluation

The Chair sought feedback on the effectiveness of this meeting and the members agreed that the conduct of the meeting had been positive and useful.

11. Next meeting

The next meeting of the Southern Groundwater and Rivers Forum will be held on Friday 15 November 2024, face to face, in Melbourne. The committee expressed that they would like the venue to be close to Southern Cross Station.

12. Close

With no further business the meeting was declared closed at 11:17am.