Victorian Murray River Floodplain Restoration Project

Commonly asked questions about the Nyah and Vinifera projects

Why don't we leave the forest (Nyah-Vinifera Regional Park) in its natural state?

The internationally significant Murray River floodplains have undergone substantial changes over time as our towns, cities, agriculture and industries have grown. These changes mean these great floodplains don't get anywhere near as much water as they need to survive and thrive.

For centuries they received more water for longer periods of time, and at the right time of year to help the environment flourish. The floodplains haven't been in their "natural" state for a long time. Weirs and dams along the Murray River have meant water doesn't flow as it once did, and the floodplains are suffering as a result.

Without the Project, there won't be enough water reaching parts of the floodplains for long enough periods of time to keep them healthy.

These projects allow us to meet the ecological objectives of the Murray Darling Basin Plan, without extra water needing to be bought. By using temporary pumps, regulators and channels, we can get water where it needs to be effectively and efficiently, helping the floodplain and keeping irrigation water in the hands of farmers and the community.

Will the project damage the natural environment?

The primary objective of the Project to make our floodplains healthier. It is vital that we help these floodplains survive and to build resilience in them so they can cope with future dry conditions and drought, and also protecting the many species that depend on them. The Project will mean a more reliable breeding and feeding habitat for fish, frogs and waterbirds.

The Nyah-Vinifera Regional Park is home to a diversity of mammals, reptiles and fish. It is also home to some threatened and significant species and more than 270 indigenous plant species. Without the Project, these species will likely be impacted by the continued degradation of the floodplains. We want Nyah-Vinifera to be around for a long time to come, and to be in a better condition for our grandchildren than it is now.

How will the project involve Traditional Owners and ensure that cultural values are protected?

Lately, much of our work with Traditional Owners has focused on beginning the development of Cultural Heritage Management Plans. As part of this process, we have been on-Country with Traditional Owners conducting archaeological assessments and other fieldwork.

Cultural Heritage Management Plans assess how projects could potentially affect cultural heritage, and how we will manage this before, during and after construction to protect cultural heritage.

The next phase of Traditional Owner consultation (due to start in the coming months) has a broader focus and will explore how the projects can complement Traditional Owner's broader land and water objectives for each site.

Could the project cause a blackwater event?

When leaf litter is not washed off a floodplain or riverbank regularly, and there is a summer flood, organic matter can be washed into the river. As the litter breaks down, it chews up all the oxygen, making it hard for fish, Murray crays or other organisms to breathe. If they can't escape to a fresher section of the river, they can die.

Having water flowing in and out of the floodplains can help avoid toxic blackwater events. Regular flows at the right time of year can wash all this leaf litter away. Flows in spring and autumn mean the litter is not flushed out during the hotter months.

Ecological monitoring will play a critical role in managing water quality at the project sites. Every year we will monitor the impacts of the watering and we will adjust the watering plans as we need to. Regular water quality testing will be undertaken to monitor things such as oxygen levels in the water. This monitoring will inform the timing of water releases back into the Murray River so that we reduce the risk of blackwater events.

The risk of blackwater events from VMFRP Projects can be managed by controlling the duration and frequency of water flows in and out of the floodplain. The Project is designed to give us the flexibility to operate the infrastructure as we need to, depending on the watering needs of the floodplain at any given time. Not every water event needs to be the same duration and frequency.

How is the project engaging with the community?

The VMFRP Project was approved in 2019 and received $29 million in funding to commence project planning. The VMFRP is committed to working with Traditional Owners, key stakeholders and community members to make sure their views and local knowledge are incorporated into project planning.

At the time of approval, Stakeholder Advisory Groups were established covering all nine of the project sites. These groups play a critical role in providing advice to the VMFRP that reflects a range of community and stakeholder interests in the region. In coming months, the membership and the objectives of the Stakeholder Advisory Groups will be reviewed to ensure that the group membership reflects the many different community and stakeholder interests within the catchment.

The projects are still in the planning and design stage and won't be completed until 2024. The next regulatory approvals process will kick off next year, and the government will make the decision on whether to approve the projects in 2022. If the projects are approved then construction will commence in late 2022 or early 2023. Local communities will play a critical role in helping us to shape and deliver the plans for each site to ensure we get maximum benefits from this large investment in our region.

Will the project impact public access to the Murray River and the forest?

These floodplains are important to our communities in a number of ways. They are great places to camp, to fish, to bushwalk, and they are vital for our local businesses. Keeping these floodplain forests healthy is also a big part of attracting tourism to our region.

While natural flood events will usually limit access to the river and forest, the Project will do what's possible minimise limits to access.

During the planning stage we will be working with land managers (such as Parks Victoria) and local communities to understand what access tracks etc may be temporarily closed during managed watering events, and what alternative access arrangements can be made.

The construction phase of the Project may temporarily disrupt access to some parts of the Murray River. We will work with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Parks Victoria to minimise any disruptions and make sure the community and stakeholders are aware of them ahead of time.

Why have Vinifera and Nyah been chosen as project sites?

All nine of the project floodplains were chosen because of their of high ecological significance. The waterways and wetlands, when inundated, provide refuges and resources for a range of flora and fauna including threatened species, as well as important waterbird breeding habitat during floods. The sites also have high cultural and social values.

Specifically, the Nyah-Vinifera floodplain contains river red gum forests which support breeding of colonial nesting waterbirds. The floodplain provides a habitat for woodland fauna that require dense and productive understorey, as well as wetland habitat for small-bodied fish. The Project will ensure these ecological values are protected so that the floodplains flourish.

How long will the water be sitting in the floodplains for?

These projects aim to fill the gaps between what can happen naturally now, and what would have happened prior to river regulation and water extraction.

Every forest and wetland is different. The watering plans are flexible; each year and each water event will be planned depending on what has happened the year before, what the condition of the floodplain is, what water is available, and whether it can be delivered when it is needed. The floodplains will not be full all of the time.

For example, at Nyah, water will be brought into the forest from late Winter and returned to the river after 2-4 months, with these events happening 7 in every 10 years.

The Projects are designed to maximise naturally occurring flood events, enabling us to temporarily hold the water in the floodplain after a flood before releasing it back into the Murray River. However, during dry conditions and low river flows we will have the flexibility to pump water (using temporary pumps) in from the Murray River if a flooding event does not fill the floodplain naturally. The pumping will allow water to extend further onto the floodplain, and to better return to the river at the end of an event through improved connectivity by removing flow impediments in the creek.

Will the project create a habitat for mosquito breeding?

The flexibility of the watering plans means that we can avoid holding water in the floodplains during the warmer months when mosquitos are more likely to breed. This is something that we will monitor over time and we can adjust our future watering plans accordingly.

How does the VMFRP help deliver the Murray Darling Basin Plan?

The key objective of all VMFRP projects is to deliver environmental outcomes as set under the Basin Plan. The Project will construct watering infrastructure at nine priority sites to deliver environmental

outcomes using less water than would be required to create a natural flood and, as such, will contribute to meeting Victoria's water recovery obligations under the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

All sites are part of the package of Sustainable Diversion Limit (SDL) adjustment measures agreed by Basin water ministers in 2017. The Basin Plan requires all SDL adjustment measures to be operational by mid-2024.

Could you please share your source of scientific data for flood levels and duration in the last 100 years or as long as you have data available to make your scientific decisions?

The data was sourced from the Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) as part of the Basin Plan implementation. Updated data may be able to be provided by contacting the MDBA.

What is the source of the earth being used to build the retaining banks? Is it subjected to the same cultural heritage impact as if any soil was used from the forest?

We are currently working through the process to source earth that will be used to build retaining banks. We expect to have a preferred site for sourcing this material by the end of this year. Once selected, this area will be subject to the same cultural heritage studies as we have undertaken for the work sites in the Park, which includes involvement from Traditional Owners.

Will the crossing incorporating the flapper valve located on the Parnee -Malloo creek near the old golf course be removed?

Yes. This bank and valve were installed several decades ago to allow irrigation of the old golf course. The bank and valve are no longer required for this purpose. This bank and valve create a significant blockage to flow in Parnee-Malloo creek. Removing them will allow us to better reconnect the floodplain to the river and improve the flow of water back off at the floodplain at the end of a flood event.

How will carp be managed?

The spread of carp either onto the floodplain, or from the floodplain to the river, is not considered a significant risk. The pumping of environmental water restricts carp movement because fine mesh screens will be installed on the temporary pumps used to get water into the creeks and floodplain. Additionally, the seasonal nature of watering means that wetlands will regularly dry out and carp won't have the opportunity to build up on the floodplain. But like everything, this is something to be monitored over time and to be continually vigilant about.