

Meeting Minutes

Meeting Details

Meeting Description:	Guttrum and Benwell Forest – Community Meeting (A meeting of the sub-committee of the Koondrook Development Committee)
Date/Time/Location:	26 November 2020, 1.00pm – 3.00pm, River Track Reserve, Koondrook

Attendees

Committee Members

Tim Shanahan – VMFRP Project Manager, East Projects	Leeza Wishart – Parks Victoria, Area Chief Ranger
Shaun Morgan – VMFRP Engagement Officer, East Projects	Nick Whatley – DELWP Forest Fire and Regions, Cohuna Operations Coordinator
Scott Wishart – Gannawarra Shire Council	Steve Thomas – Committee Member
James Whelan – Committee Member	Tim O’Brien – Committee Member

Other Attendees

Josh White – VMFRP Project Director	Dan Whelan	Dianne Robinson	Cameron Cockroft
Wayne McNeil	Darryl McNeil	Scott Millar	Dianne Millar
Kylie Doyle	Tim McNeil	Geoff McNeil	Skeeta Verhey
			Alan Taylor

Actions

Item	Description / Action	By Whom
1.0	VMFRP to provide groundwater monitoring data.	Tim Shanahan
2.0	VMFRP to share environmental watering inundation extent maps.	Tim Shanahan
3.0	VMFRP to discuss alternative pumping location in the middle of Guttrum Forest (raised by Darryl McNeil, James Whelan).	Tim Shanahan
4.0	VMFRP to provide further discussion on shift away from gravity channel supply option to pumping option.	Tim Shanahan
5.0	VMFRP to provide access to the 2014 Guttrum and Benwell Forest SDL Adjustment Supply Measure Business Cases on website.	Tim Shanahan
6.0	VMFRP to undertake testing at various locations (to be agreed with community) to determine causes for recent tree deaths.	Tim Shanahan

Meeting Notes

Attendance sheet was onsite for signing by people for purposes of COVID tracing if necessary.

The meeting commenced at 1pm

Tim Shanahan introduced himself and agency representatives Shaun Morgan, Josh White, Nick Whatley and Leeza Wishart.

Tim gave a short COVID/OHS safety brief and an acknowledgement of Barapa Barapa Wamba Wamba Country.

Tim Shanahan:

As per the Koondrook Development Committee (KDC) sub-committees wishes, the VMFRP project team were really keen to get out and talk to the community and today is just one opportunity for that. This is the start of a process, not the end. There will be up to 2 further years of engagement processes as part of the approvals process to run through which will provide lots of opportunities for community engagement.

We'll run through the list of questions and responses raised via the KDC and by other local landholders (a copy of the FAQs be found at <https://www.vmfrp.com.au/projects/>). Today we'll elaborate further on our responses to the questions. Please ask any question along the way as this is also an opportunity to hear from you, not for us to just do all the speaking.

Josh White:

I'm the Project Director across 9 project sites between here and the South Australia border. The project delivery is a combined delivery partnership process across the 9 sites. Project partners are Lower Murray Water (LMW - lead), North Central CMA, Mallee CMA, Goulburn Murray Water (GMW), Parks Victoria (PV) and the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP). The project has been around for a while with the business cases being developed across 2013-2014. Further project funding in last 18 months has been provided to progress the project objectives, designs, proposed operations and to undertake further community engagement so these are holistic projects that benefit the entire community.

Tim Shanahan:

As many would be aware Shaun Morgan has been out talking to neighbouring landowners to spread information and get feedback for the last 12 months. This is another opportunity to receive information and provide any feedback to us.

The primary purpose of the project is to achieve environmental outcomes using less water. To do this we need to understand what frequency, duration and extent of proposed waterings that the environment requires and design infrastructure that can provide this. There's two main features requiring watering events. These are the **semi-permanent wetlands** and the broader **forest floodplain**. We need to understand the operating environment and work out how to design the project in a way that irrigation and the environment can best co-exist into the future. Ideally we'd like to maximise the benefits out of both, as well as flow on benefits to the community. Water is a precious asset for this community and we need to get the balance right and achieve our objectives using less water than high-river floods that would otherwise be required to flood these areas more frequently.

There's lots of species of flora and fauna that we're trying to manage for here. There's Flood-Dependent Understorey, Semi-Permanent Wetlands, and there's vegetation communities on the higher ground too that will tolerate in-frequent larger floods but don't rely on water year on year. There's a lot of cultural values and benefits here being worked through with the Barapa Barapa Wamba Wamba community. Our aim is to protect culture whilst achieving cultural outcomes if it's possible to do both (i.e. if construction can avoid impacting cultural values).

We know and acknowledge this is a State Forest, a working forest, supporting timber industry, apiary, recreation, camping etc. Our goal is to maximise the benefits for all and not disrupt any existing industry and recreation. We want to enhance it, not result in negative impacts.

We have a lot of different bits of information we need to investigate, create, distribute and consider, including community feedback into any of those plans and proposals. We're here to work with you on that.

In regards to watering events – we develop what are called Seasonal Watering Plan each and every year that look at what the forest needs each year. If it's wet, then less water would be required, if its dry then probably more. We develop different scenarios depending on whether it is likely to be drought, dry, average or wet.

Community member: pretty dry up to 2010, but 2010-11 really wet – how do you avoid the risk of adding water and contributing water onto natural flood events that affect the town and community? **Tim**

Shanahan response: yes, it was dry and then turned wet. The Seasonal Watering Plan will have different scenarios, dry, average, wet etc. We would adjust operations as conditions change so in that instance, we wouldn't have operated the pumps.

Community member: How did that relate to Gunbower Forest, didn't you water on top of that? **Nick Whatley responded:** No, that was only natural flooding in Gunbower.

Community member: So this year was dry, would you water in spring? **Tim Shanahan response:** If you were going to water then you would look at the right time to get soil moisture into it.

Community member: There's been high winter flows in recent periods (in the Murray River). Who's responsible for high rivers? What if you've watered and then it comes from the Murray River, what will you do? **Tim Shanahan response:** Guttrum and Benwell fill from the bottom end, at about 18,000 ML/day water will start to enter the forest from the Murray. At about 24,000-25,000 ML/day at Guttrum you'll start to get spilling from the eastern end and water cascading right through the forest. Benwell is similar, about 25,000 ML/day will see similar cross-forest flows occurring. There's usually about 7,000 ML/day in the Murray River, and flows max out around 13,000-15,000 ML/day for Inter-Valley Transfers and downstream requirements. We don't want to conflict with those flows.

Community member: Inter-Valley Transfers opened up last night last night and dumped around 11,000 ML/day overnight. Who did that? Who's water is it? **Tim Shanahan response:** it's the MDBA river operations.

Community member: Murray River only has so much capacity in system. **Tim Shanahan response:** yes, we need to be aware of that and not create a higher risk.

Community member: What river heights have you assumed in the proposal? **Tim Shanahan response:** we've looked at the last hundred years of flow data, but we develop the Seasonal Watering Plan scenarios and then adjust as necessary. Every year there's annual planning for different scenarios.

Community member: what's your definition of a Semi-permanent wetland. **Tim Shanahan response:** we have a few Semi-permanent wetlands in both Guttrum and in Benwell. **Community member:** I say ephemeral, not permanent wetlands. **Tim Shanahan response:** we're using terminology that is easy for most people to understand but those terms mean the same thing. **Community member:** Semi-permanent and ephemeral are different terms. Bit confusing terms for me and probably others.

Tim Shanahan: So we're working out how we can get water into those semi-permanent wetlands and how we can get it into the flood-dependent understory as well. We're investigating the watering regimes we need i.e. what would be the frequency and duration required? What's the ideal conditions to create food and nesting for bird species? What's the best regime to create return flows into the Murray River to supply fish food?

Community member: Are they exotic birds? **Tim Shanahan:** We're targeting Colonial nesting species, some local species, some migrating species. **Community member:** Exotic species will probably use it too. **Tim Shanahan:** We will be monitoring the forest and can monitor that.

Community member: What about viruses from mosquitos? It's been a problem at Gunbower. How will you prevent the backlogging of the water? At Gunbower Creek they shut the weir and high flows from the Murray River caused water to sit around for long periods and large mosquito breeding events occurred. It was like a wall of mosquitos flying through the air. Is the ambition to reduce stagnant water and blackwater? **Tim Shanahan:** There's been no blackwater events in the Gunbower forest from environmental watering events. Environmental watering events are closely monitored for oxygen and other things to adjust operations if need be. **Community member:** There has been blackwater down there in my lifetime. It was black, stank and was putrid with dead fish, dying crayfish. You have had them in Gunbower. It depends how long you've been monitoring? **Tim Shanahan:** We've been monitoring Gunbower for 16 years.

Tim Shanahan: One of the committee questions was will VMFRP water the whole forest every year? The answer is no. Our objective is to have water in the forest around 6-7 years in 10. We know natural floods will still occur through these forests too. Our project proposes to fill the gaps in the flooding frequency – not to water 6-7 years in 10. If you have 3-4 years of natural floods then you might only pump water another 2-3 years in 10. But if you haven't had any natural floods, like during the millennium drought period you might use the pump stations more often to achieve the desired watering frequency. We won't be watering every single year because that's not what occurred naturally.

Community member: What's your baseline monitoring? How do you judge what is normal? Added another **Community member:** When did that monitoring start for Guttrum? **Tim Shanahan:** Vegetation mapping would have been done since the 1990s, maybe even earlier in the 1980s through all public land reserves. So we're tracking change over time. Therefore, we can understand how the vegetation has changed over time too.

Community member: So there will be no levee banks along the river at all? So there'll be 6 foot of water at Darryl McNeil's property. How are you going to keep it in the forest? **Tim Shanahan:** There'll be a regulator and containment bank at the western end near the Guttrum West pump station site. We'll pump it in, and hold it in the forest using a newly built regulator within that containment bank.

Community member: So that will be a levee? **Tim Shanahan:** There will be raised containment bank. We generally won't be touching the existing levees, besides some repairs where needed. Only roads that will be elevated at the bottom end to contain water or ensure safe access for maintenance staff and the

public. The design of infrastructure is to not impede natural floods. If natural water starts coming into the forest you might hold it in there longer to make the most benefit from it i.e. extend the duration of small floods. If large natural floods occur, any new regulators can be opened so as not to not impede those floods.

Community member: Why don't you put the pump station at this top end of the forest near Cassidy Lane and let it flow down towards Darryl McNeil's? *(Question wasn't responded too as new questions were asked immediately after).*

Community member: with monitoring going forward, you'll be the biggest irrigator in the area. How many monitors will you have to ensure you don't create a salinity risk? Also worried you will compact clay soils with weight of the water. How many monitoring sites will there be? Can we access the data? It should be public data. **Tim Shanahan:** There's 14 groundwater monitoring bores across the Guttrum and Benwell Forests we are monitoring right now. **Community member:** really in here now? **Tim Shanahan:** yes, we've been monitoring them for 3 years now and can provide the data to you. **Tim Shanahan** (in response to first line of questions): They're deep rooted trees in the forest and use lots of water so will utilise the water we put in. **Community member:** at home they don't have deep roots and they blow over easily because their roots are shallow because they don't need to look for water. I disagree that the trees are deep rooted. My trees aren't because they're getting water – like you'll do therefore your trees will get lazy and be shallow rooted. **Tim Shanahan:** The vertisols capture water in the shallow profile and create a freshwater lens. **Community member:** Will they chase water or not? When this is wet they will become lazy and not deep root down. **Tim Shanahan:** The existing large trees will already be deep rooted. Younger ones probably won't be as yet but we would expect them to develop deep root systems. **Community member:** The large trees will compete with the suckers. **Tim Shanahan:** It's a State Forest so we have to be mindful of that too.

Community member: So the groundwater study included no site visits, correct? **Tim Shanahan:** the salinity study used existing groundwater bore data. **Community member:** so done from the office? **Tim Shanahan:** Yes, done from the office. I will send you the data. **Community member:** Gunbower data doesn't have a lot of salinity monitoring. **Tim Shanahan** – no that's not true, there's 60 bores in the area. **Community member:** What info do you have from that data? **Tim Shanahan:** There's a report by Mark Hocking that interpreted the data. The summary from that report is that environmental water is not entering the deep groundwater in Gunbower Forest. The trees are using the water in the vertisols. **Community member:** I thought the report said that the monitoring was a bit hazy? **Tim Shanahan:** The last 15 bores went in in 2013 have piezometers. **Community member:** You started flooding the bush in 2014 though so you've got one event to base this on. I'm not sure we really understand what is happening in that forest from one event. The report is difficult to understand. **Tim Shanahan:** The groundwater report covers more than one environmental event as well as natural floods. We captured data in the years 2014, 2015 and 2018, years when environmental watering events occurred using the Hipwell Road regulator, and in natural flood events in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2016. We'll continue to monitor and every 5 years the data will be interpreted.

Community member: At the Guttrum West pump station, all that water that gets pumped into the forest there so will you build a bank in there? **Shaun Morgan:** Yes, there is a containment bank and regulator across the flood runner that drains back into the river there. We will pump into the flood runner and let it flood back into the forest, as it would in a natural high river. **Tim Shanahan:** The Guttrum Forest starts to flood at 18,000 ML/day in the Murray River through this flood runner. In regard to pump station location,

we had to find a deep pool in river for the pump station site which dictates the location chosen (as well as proximity to proposed watering sites). When doing a full forest flood, we would engage both pump stations and let it cascade down from the east to the west which replicates what would occur under the natural flood conditions.

Community member: Will River Track be out of action during watering events? How long? **Tim Shanahan:** River Track is generally higher land so environmental watering events won't inundate River Track areas – these events are much lower than natural events. **Josh White:** We will share the mapping with you, extents and levels.

Tim Shanahan: Will we buy more water for project? No, we're using existing environmental entitlements.

Community member: What about the 450GL? **Tim Shanahan:** That's the "up-water" referred to in the Basin Plan, not our water project. Victoria doesn't support the 450GL above the 2,750GL proposal. Our water is within the 2,750GL proposal – its already recovered.

Community member: Is this an SDL project? How much are you saving? **Tim Shanahan:** We need to work with the Murray Darling Basin Authority to understand what the final water savings figures would be, as it needs to be modelled all together across all the SDL projects.

Tim Shanahan: Proposed full-forest inundation regime is for the broader forest to be watered 6-7 years in 10. The Semi-permanent wetlands will be more like 8 years in 10 (included in 6-7 years of full-forest inundation, not additional). The Guttrum West pump station with containment bank and regulators will enable filling of the forest akin to natural conditions (from the bottom up). (Tim then spoke to a map of inundation extents and how water moves through the forest and engages different areas at different times).

Tim Shanahan: What about stagnant water? We can use the Benwell drain to get rid of any poor quality water if it is occurring. The outflows into the Murray River would be diluted by the high flows in the river. We can also pump more water into the forest to dilute it further.

Community member: Instead of pumping it in at either end, can't you just use one pump at the regulator in the middle of the forest to pump into the whole forest? **Tim Shanahan:** Isn't that a high area of the forest in the middle of Guttrum? **Community member:** It's the last spot to dry up in the middle of the forest. **Tim Shanahan:** We'd have to split the flows with pipes and you probably wouldn't get through flow from east to west that way – but let's look into it. **Community member:** lots of savings if only one pump.

Community member: This project wouldn't stack up as a private project due to the construction of expensive underground cables. I can't see how this project stacks up.

Community member: What's happened since 2014 when you said pumping wasn't viable? And yet now we've moved to pump stations. **Added another Community member:** Why did you scrap the proposal to use the channel system. It has much less users now and lower water use and so maybe it could work now?

Community member responded: They weren't going to use that channel because there was only 250 ML/day capacity – so not enough capacity. **Community member:** I'd say they'd have to buy delivery shares, why not use a system that will struggle in the future and provide support to that system – it's already there. **Community member responded:** But Gunbower Creek has the issue of a lack of capacity already. They can't water when we do because of the lack of capacity. **Another community member added:** Gunbower Creek can't handle it now, and there's already degradation from flows, so it probably

can't work. **Tim Shanahan:** Yes usage has come right back on the irrigation channel system, but the delivery shares are still there if customers want to use the channel. I don't want to compete with irrigators. **Community member:** I don't want to pay more of the costs when there's an option for other customers to share the costs. Everyone's paying for delivery shares that they're not using. Maybe VMFRP could buy them? **Community member responded:** The upper creek is already at capacity (seconded by **another Community member**). **Community member:** But those delivery shares are accounted for in that capacity. **Community member responded:** Goulburn Murray Water has arrangements with environmental water managers that irrigation water comes first. **Community member:** I'm just saying that the channel system is already there, VMFRP investment would support the system and helps share the cost. **Community member responded:** The environment would want priority over us to be able deliver water at the right time. **Added another Community member:** We've never seen delivery shares kick in on our system. But if rice comes (or similar) it would eventually kick in and become a problem for all. **Community member responded:** If environmental water managers owned delivery shares they wouldn't necessarily give us (irrigators) water priority. **Community member:** They should be on par with everyone else. **Community member responded:** There's a hierarchy and environmental water comes last. **Tim Shanahan:** We'll look at it together if you like i.e. business cases and where we've got to now and why. **Community member:** just seems like a waste of money not to use the existing system that's already there. It's not being used by us. **Community member responded:** It's being used up the top though. **Community member:** But the delivery shares are still there.

Community member: I want the whole 2014 reports to review and go through with Tim Shanahan.

Community member: Compared to the other VMFRP projects, what's the dollars like here compared to other projects. Capital and ongoing costs. Supporting previous comment, pumping isn't cheap, but I feel like its overkill for the size of the forest. **Added another Community member:** Using the channel system is probably the only benefit of this project for the community.

Community member: What's the cost of the whole project? **Tim Shanahan:** Current estimates are \$12.4 million. **Community member:** Compared to 2014? It was \$28 million in 2014. How is running all this power and pumps going to be cheaper? **Tim Shanahan:** The big difference in cost is the levee banks. The channel supply options would have heavier reliance on the levee systems and therefore would incur higher costs to repair or replace them. The proposed pumping option avoids a lot of those issues – there's only 2 spots where we need significant attention at Hall Rd (west side of Benwell Forest) and Millar Rd (west side of Guttrum Forest).

Community member: The highest water depth I read in 2014 was 1.5m deep in 2014 report. **Tim Shanahan:** The average depth across the forest is 750mm. I think you could be meaning the semi-permanent wetlands where water will be higher – particularly in Little Reed Bed Swamp. **Community member:** What height does Darryl McNeil's' levee need to be? **Tim Shanahan:** No higher than current levels but some repairs/maintenance would be required to degraded sections.

Community member: Over at Koondrook-Perricoota Forest, the costs blew out from \$80 million to much more. How can you assure us this project won't do the same?

Community member: How about The Living Murray (Gunbower) project? **Tim Shanahan:** That project came in under budget.

Community member: What are your disappointments and what are you pleased about in Gunbower? As this will be more of what you've already done there. **Tim Shanahan:** We've seen vegetation improvement in the sites that get water, compared to those that only get natural floods, and at the sites that get both.

Community member: Why doesn't it look like what you're describing right now?

Tim Shanahan: – The aquatic vegetation rhizomes bunker down over summer period and so it looks very bare. You can't see it, but it's there.

Community member: There's no salt bush in areas where there once was, is that what your trying to achieve? **Tim Shanahan:** Salt bush is not a flood-dependent understory species so we wouldn't want to see it there no. **Community member:** You've had some disappointments i.e. fish kills, what have you learnt? **Tim Shanahan:** The Living Murray project has learnt a lot but I'm not an ecologist so will leave them to answer that.

Community member: It has to be a big cost mowing, and having people with whipper snippers etc. right where we're standing. Probably killing lizards and bugs in the grass. Cattle can do that work easy. Let's work together on this. The paperwork on the project is overwhelming, where do I even start to read it. The cattle-grids got ripped out, river track got upgraded, this takes away from the natural forest. The grazing works well. **Added another Community member:** If you look at my Guttrum Forest Facebook site, I've taken videos of the weeds and Patterson's Curse that's come up after 2 years without cattle. If cattle were in their strategically a month or 2 before seed sprung, it wouldn't have happened. Can we put a study on it? You've just blatantly thrown us out of here based on high country reports and Barmah reports – not local reports. **Community member:** So can we partner with you on when they go in and when they come out? What's the fire plan for these sites? I haven't seen one. I'm worried if I start a fire it will threaten the town and I'll get the blame. Are cattle a simple and cost-effective tool or not? **Added another Community member:** Its controlled grazing. **Community member:** We won't get anywhere if we don't start working together. We just won't engage anymore.

Nick Whatley (DELWP): (introduced himself) The grazing issue was a decision made by the State Government after the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) report recommendations (River Red Gum Forests Investigation, VEAC 2008). I encourage you to speak to a higher level of government, and your local Members of Parliament etc. if you want to elevate the issue up the chain.

Community member: But we need your local support to do that. There's never hard rules, so let's make our own local rules. Include landowners in management decisions. **Added another community member:** It was changed by government on a whim, not by local conditions of this forest. **Added another Community member:** does grazing make a difference to fire in this forest? **Nick Whatley:** We don't have that level of information/reports done for this location to confirm or deny that. **Community member:** So your only tool is controlled burns (if you won't allow grazing).

Community member: What is your fire risk reduction plan? If you water the forest more but won't manage the issue. **Added another Community member:** We're going to have 3 natural floods and 3 unnatural floods = 6 out of 10 years of flooding and we've removed our means for managing fire risk in the forest (cattle grazing). We've had fires but not with high fuel loads, we've been able to put them out/manage them. **Nick Whatley:** Cattle has been out of Gunbower for longer than here, and I don't know of and have no evidence of any increase in occurrences of fire since that time. Fuel-reduction burning is not a tool we want to use in Redgum forests as it affects the vulnerable flora species that we're trying to protect. Our go-to tools for these forest is aggressive first attack with a good track system. The most

common cause of ignition around here is camp fires which is where we focus our efforts to prevent that from happening. The first job on the morning of any Total Fire Ban day is for our offices to drive through and make sure all fires are extinguished by campers. We also fly a plane along the Murray River to make sure nothing flares up that we're not aware of. **Community member:** I don't let my paddocks grow as high as this forest or the Shire could fine me or make me do it or get someone else to do it and then make me pay for it. I want to know what you plan is, your written plan. **Nick Whatley:** those plans happen at the regional level at the strategic landscape scale – not at the individual forest scale. We've spent lots of money upgrading River track for these reasons (fast suppression of fires).

Community member: Who's responsible for getting cattle out if they get in there? Why don't you just ignore it for 6 weeks if they get in there. **Nick Whatley:** I can't just turn a blind eye to it, it's an offense and I'm an authorised officer. **Added another Community member:** We couldn't get away with that level of grass growing and not managing it.

Community member: Who controls the weeds and vermin? **Nick Whatley:** It's a shared responsibility between DELWP and Parks Victoria. We manage weeds on a priority basis. We don't have an infinite bucket of money or staff for such management. Therefore we set priorities each year on management activities, generally in order of – fire, fuel, then weeds. Boxthorn, Blackberry, and Wheel Cactus is generally the focus around here as these are declared Weeds of National Significance. **Leeza Wishart (Parks Victoria):** We manage the land from River Track to river. The biggest weed spreaders are campers via their vehicles. We have 2 field staff in this area and they spend 50% of their time spraying weeds throughout the year across a large area in the Gunbower Forest, and along the Murray River Reserve from Torrumbarry through to Lake Boga. It's a large area, we have low staff numbers, and low dollars.

Community member: So when you start watering, you'll get more weeds, so you'll get more staff? **Nick Whatley:** I would love to have more staff to do more work. **Added another Community member:** Foxes and cockatoos spread weeds too, biggest weed spreader in my opinion. And the biggest fire threat is arson. An arsonist lit fires in Guttrum the day after Black Saturday, but there was low growth due to cattle grazing so didn't become an issue. **Nick Whatley:** Yes arson is an issue I agree. One more thing on fire, there's both localized fuel issues and there's seasonal issues i.e. like this year due to wet year we've had good growth. **Added another Community member:** We're going back to the 80s in terms of moisture/rain/floods but without cattle grazing this time and I think the fire risk will therefore increase.

Nick Whatley: The risk in these forests and Gunbower is relatively low. We don't have the overall fuel loads like other forests. We don't have the fibrous tree species that can cause spotting. We don't have the elevation to deal with like in high country areas. We have good access for fast suppression. We get good help from community in terms of vigilance, so we can respond quickly and suppress fires quickly. An aggressive first response in first hour is critical to stopping the spread and growth of fires. We're fortunate we have brigades and communities close by who provide early visibility on any fires. If you have a fire in town brigades will stay in town, not go to forest, but the emergency management hierarchy will send more resources to suppress further fires in the landscape. **Community member:** Yes we're lucky now but we're going to change it now by more watering. **Added another Community member:** But your evidence is based on 70 years with cattle, you have no idea what will happen with more watering and more growth. You won't stop a fire getting out through the Guttrum Forest entry at Koondrook-Murrabit Road, you won't stop it. **Nick Whatley:** High wind days will be fast moving grass fires, not tree canopy fires.

Community member: Out in Koondrook-Pericoota Forest the weeds are really high and you can't tell me you will control it. **Nick Whatley:** It would be very difficult. **Added another Community member:** You should write into your plans that if fuel loads increase to catastrophic levels than we will look at other

management options (like cattle). **Added another Community member:** Agree this needs to be talked about. **Nick Whatley:** I'm always happy to talk to the community about how we can manage risks together. **Added another Community member:** You've got a real opportunity to get this one right by working with people. **Nick Whatley:** With grazing though, the fuel loads is not only factor that is considered. There's pretty strong legislation with regards to avoiding cultural values/risks.

Tim Shanahan: these projects are holistic, so we need to look at all these different issues. We need to build them into the project now and cost them up for a proposed business case to be submitted to government. I have to get the balance right. If we don't expect the benefits, then it may not go ahead.

Community member: You've got 49 different recreations types, what are they? 49!? 80% of your reports are about flooding, there's not enough detail about other factors i.e. fire, flood risk, recreation etc.

Community member: The forest looks ok. **Added another Community member:** Only the first 200m from the river. **Added another Community member:** There's been some dieback where water has stayed in the forest too long.

Community member: What about vermin, will annual flooding increase vermin animals/proliferate? **Nick Whatley:** Vermin control is much like weed control. We prioritise and target things where the most success is likely. **Community member:** Do you use 1080? **Nick Whatley:** The appointed contractor chooses what to use but they can use 1080. **Community member:** That can be an issue, i.e. at duck opening season, fox baits were out, all identified and recorded as 1080 baits. There were 30 campers already packing up to leave due to kids and dogs. Tourists were heading off somewhere else, they might not come back. 1080 baits is a really bad idea. If you're going to do vermin control, what are the alternatives? **Nick Whatley:** In Gunbower State Forest I've asked 1080 not to occur during school holidays/duck hunting season as these are the high tourist times. We understand these forests are some of the only public forest areas you can bring your dog to as well so were well aware of that and don't want to cause issues. **Leeza Wishart (PV):** We say baits can't be laid along the Murray River Reserve. **Community member:** Yes you're doing that now but you weren't 6 years ago until we brought it to your attention. We got it changed.

Community member: At Gunbower, farmers have to put in kangaroo fencing because floods drive them out onto high value crops. If you inundate for 7 months of the year they will come out onto private land.

Tim Shanahan: Not all of the forest will be flooded. About 50% of Guttrum and 75% of Benwell in forest flood events. Much less when only the semi-permanent wetland events are occurring. **Community member:** Fences only started to come up 5 years ago, farmers did it because of the flooding. Kangaroos were throwing their joeys out because they were starving. **Added another Community member:** We'll get overpopulated with kangaroos. **Community member:** parts of Spur island has been fenced off and it looks incredible. Other areas are bare, it's not just cattle doing the damage, kangaroos eat things bare too. **Added another Community member:** We've had kangaroos right through Koondrook, in backyards, on roads looking for food. I've never seen that in 25 years until basically the last 18 months. We've had a good season so they're staying out in forest now. It becomes quite a tourist attraction. I live right in town and they're there all the time. Permanent water will cause them to breed and spread.

Tim Shanahan: The forest will remain State Forest, there's no intention to change it. Darryl you asked about cutting trees down – I have to minimise that as best as possible during construction. Even though it's a government project we have to apply to other parts of government and ask whether we can do this without having too big an impact. We're still waiting for an answer from Ministers on what that approvals process will look like. The Commonwealth approvals will align with the State processes. These processes

will check us against our assertions of the benefits. **Added another Community member:** We had no opportunity to submit to the State government process and yet they will make the decision. **Tim Shanahan:** Correct, the State Government process doesn't allow for submissions before the decision. The Commonwealth process had a 10 day public comment period. We verbally asked them if they would consider extending it due to COVID-19, but they said no. The Victorian State process will provide many engagement opportunities moving forward. The next 2 years will have lots of opportunities. **Josh White:** There was no consultation through the State referral process because it's an application process. It's not an approval process. That comes next and will involve community significantly.

Community member: Can we stop it? Can we stop this project? **Josh White:** You'll get a chance to have your say through that State approvals process. **Community member:** I submitted to the Commonwealth process and asked for feedback and haven't got any for months. I'm not making any more submissions until someone reads them and responds to me. Why don't you just wait another 10 years and watch the Gunbower project and make sure you don't mess it up. **Added another Community member:** Why can't you just wait and monitor Gunbower for longer and get it right? **Added another Community member:** The MDBA chair openly admitted we will make mistakes and learn from them yet is still forging ahead with projects anyway. **Added another Community member:** Shouldn't Peter Walsh have been here today as our local Member of Parliament? **Tim Shanahan:** Formal engagement hasn't commenced yet. It's not a project yet, just a proposal. The State Minister for Planning will tell us what to do next. We've come out earlier to talk to you as part of the process engaging with the Koondrook Development Committee. Our plans to date are a first draft for us to start a conversation about. I expect we'll need a specific group of stakeholders to consult with and be on a committee to work through 15-20 specialist areas of further investigation. So I'm flagging that with you today. We're using the Koondrook Development Committee (KDC) as a forum now in an effort to get the conversations rolling.

Community member: There was an Expression of Interest for earth fill in the paper today, where will that be used? **Tim Shanahan:** Largely at the pump station sites.

Community member: You've got a group here today, that's your starting point for any committee. **Added another Community member:** It started through KDC but it can change. **Tim Shanahan:** I want interested people involved. P.S. we're only requesting contact details today for COVID contact tracing, but if you want me to use the details to be able to contact you please let me know and I will *(there was no objection raised to this)*.

Community member: Do you get sick of being slaughtered about this? Semi joking. I think we need someone a bit higher. Let's get it right. **Tim Shanahan:** I'm passionate about getting a good result for this area. **Community member:** People are just doing their job, but it's a passionate topic. We need avenues to get to the right person in each of the departments like those here today. We've got skilled knowledgeable people here and we don't sometimes give you the time to understand what we know. **Tim Shanahan:** We'll provide the opportunities, but community has to participate. I'm passionate about this project.

Community member: One question, with flooding the forest, you have your research and your reports, why wouldn't you go through the back of the Guttrum forest and see what those dead trees they died from and make sure you're not going to make a mistake? Dig them up and see what they died from? **Tim Shanahan:** We can do that and then every 3-5 years to give us a longer time of understanding.

Community member: Take individual tree samples across the forest and find out scientifically if it is really required or not. We need the right answer, or my backyard is going to look like bare ground. **Added**

another Community member: It's like a stocking rate, too many and they won't survive. And it's a sandpit back there which is why they died. They have to do this project because we've regulated the river and the forests don't get the flows that they would historically. **Community member:** It depends what's beneath the ground. **Added another Community member:** Are you saying it needs thinning? **Community member:** Yes. If you have small trees underneath it will take water away from the big trees.

Community member: Can we do data in this particular location? **Tim Shanahan:** Yes, we can work with you on collecting data in this local area. **Added another Community member:** You have to do the homework first before we get this wrong. **Added another Community member:** Barmah forest have done control blocks, half thinned blocks, measuring trees, measuring rainfall, everything, to see if they can get a thinning regime that is the best for a redgum national park. **Tim Shanahan:** Will you work with us on this project? Me and Shaun. **Community member:** Yes. But let's spend money to make sure we understand the problem first and that this is the right project. **Tim Shanahan:** Shaun and my role is to be in the middle and get the information flowing between the community and government in a way that people can understand.

Community member: Groundwater report is a good example of a report that is very difficult to understand. **Added another Community member:** There's 4 bores there at 90,000EC, sea water is 30,000EC (Tim corrected him that it is 56,000EC). **Community member:** The report doesn't answer questions that community wants to know. No good using data at Morgan. What is the modelling on the height of the river? **Tim Shanahan:** Morgan in South Australia is used to measure the impact on the Murray River not the project specific salinity. I want to use long term data. **Community member:** but the river has changed dramatically in last 5 years so is long term data relevant? **Added another Community member:** This river has changed so much. You have to get this right. You can't get it wrong and go backwards – the forest will be gone.

Participants started dispersing at 3pm. Meeting called to close at 3pm.

END MINUTES

For further information on relevant matters, please don't hesitate to contact:

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