

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee



**Inquiry into Auditor-General's
Report No. 202: *Meeting
Obligations to Protect Ramsar
Wetlands (2016)***

Parliament of Victoria
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Ordered to be published

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT PRINTER
June 2020

PP No 136, Session 2018–20
ISBN 978 1 925703 96 2 (print version), 978 1 925703 97 9 (PDF version)

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Functions

The Public Accounts and Estimates Committee is a joint parliamentary committee constituted under the *Parliamentary Committees Act 2003* (the Act).

The Committee comprises ten members of Parliament drawn from both Houses of Parliament.

The Committee carries out investigations and reports to Parliament on matters associated with the financial management of the State. Its functions under the Act are to inquire into, consider and report to the Parliament on:

- any proposal, matter or thing concerned with public administration or public sector finances
- the annual estimates or receipts and payments and other Budget papers and any supplementary estimates of receipts or payments presented to the Assembly and the Council
- audit priorities for the purposes of the *Audit Act 1994*.

The Committee has a series of obligations and responsibilities regarding the Victorian Auditor-General and the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO). One of these is to undertake follow-up inquiries on selected audits conducted by VAGO. Follow-up inquiries look at the progress that has been made implementing the audits' recommendations, identify any issues with implementation and investigate new issues that may have arisen since the report was tabled. They allow the Committee to make recommendations that will improve specific areas of public administration and accountability.

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Terms of reference

Inquiry into Auditor-General's Report no. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016)

Under the *Parliamentary Committees Act 2003*, the Committee is responsible for conducting follow up inquiries on selected audits conducted by the Victorian Auditor-General.

Follow up inquiries look at the progress that has been made implementing audit recommendations, identify any issues with implementation and investigate new issues that may have arisen since the report was tabled. Follow up inquiries also allow the Committee to make recommendations that will improve specific areas of public administration and accountability.

The Auditor-General made the following three recommendations:

1. That the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, in conjunction with Parks Victoria and catchment management authorities:
 - develop and implement robust governance arrangements for managing Ramsar sites, including clarifying roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for planning, management and reporting
 - strengthen management plans to include time frames and resourcing to ensure that actions are carried out effectively and in a timely way
2. That the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning:
 - oversee the development of a finalised Ramsar management plan for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port sites
 - work with catchment management authorities and site managers to develop and assess options for the direct funding of management plan activities focused on high-priority threats that impact on the ecological character of Ramsar sites
 - implement arrangements to oversee how management plans are put into effect.
3. That the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning lead the development of a statewide approach to monitoring the ecological character of Ramsar sites, through a specific monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework.

Chair's foreword

The Public Accounts and Estimates Committee is responsible for undertaking follow-up inquiries on selected audits conducted by the Victorian Auditor General's Office.

The focus of this follow-up inquiry is a VAGO audit from 2016, which considered whether the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) was meeting its obligations to protect Ramsar wetlands in Victoria.

The Committee's deliberations during the inquiry sought to determine whether the Auditor General's recommendations were fully implemented, and as such whether there is an effective regime to manage Victoria's Ramsar sites and protect them from decline.

The Committee held three days of public hearings and heard evidence from 13 witnesses. The Committee also made two site visits to see first-hand some of the work being undertaken to manage Victorian Ramsar sites. Further, 457 submissions were received from the public. The Committee has been most grateful to the individuals and groups who contributed to the inquiry through their submissions and evidence.

The report shows that the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning has implemented the recommendations made by VAGO. This is a positive outcome. However, there are always areas in environmental protection where improvements can be made. The report highlights these areas and the Committee has made 16 recommendations to this effect.

I would like to thank my fellow Committee members for the professional and collegiate way they have approached this inquiry. I would also like to thank the Secretariat for supporting the Committee's work and preparing this report.

I believe that this report will make a positive contribution to ensuring that Victoria's Ramsar sites are managed in a way that will maintain their ecological character and ensure these unique environments are preserved for generations to come.

I commend both the report and its recommendations to the community and to the government.



Lizzie Blandthorn MP
Chair

Executive summary

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) has implemented the audit recommendations made by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO). However, the Committee notes that there are opportunities to improve Ramsar site management. These include through the enhanced engagement of Traditional Owners in the governance of Ramsar sites, ensuring key Ramsar documents are updated, improving direct funding, facilitating improved data access and use by site managers, and managing changes to the ecological character of Ramsar sites. This will better position DELWP to effectively manage Victoria's Ramsar sites in a way that maintains their ecological character and ensures their wise use, in line with Australia's commitments under the Ramsar Convention.

Governance arrangements for Ramsar sites

The Committee has found that DELWP has addressed VAGO's recommendation, and clarified the governance arrangements for Victorian Ramsar sites. Site coordinating committees for Ramsar sites have been established and the Inter-Agency Governance Group has been convened to improve governance at Ramsar sites and oversee the implementation of agreed agency roles and responsibilities. As a result, there is a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different agencies.

Wetlands in Victoria are of cultural significance to Traditional Owners. Following the publication of the audit, there are new obligations under the Ramsar convention to engage with Traditional Owners. The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan requires contracting parties to ensure that the knowledge, innovations and practices of the Traditional Owners are integrated in the management of Victorian Ramsar sites. However, this is not occurring in the management of all Ramsar sites in Victoria.

Management of Ramsar sites

DELWP has addressed VAGO's recommendations by establishing a framework to strengthen the management of Ramsar sites and finalising the management plans for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port Ramsar sites. The annual action plans developed by DELWP facilitate the work of site managers to target key threats to Ramsar sites. Although, it is too early to determine their effectiveness. The plans vary in quality and the Committee has identified opportunities for their improvement.

The majority of Ramsar management plans have not been updated since VAGO's audit was tabled in 2016. This means that several issues identified by VAGO, which may impact the long-term management of the ecological character of these sites, have not been addressed. The Ecological Character Description (ECD) for Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula has been in draft form since 2011 and

remains unpublished. In addition, three Victorian Ramsar sites are currently undergoing a formal assessment to determine if their limits of acceptable change (LAC) have been exceeded. For two of these sites, a potential change in ecological character was first identified in 2009 and 2011 respectively.

Ramsar site funding

Since 2016 DELWP has provided \$5.235 million in funding to Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) over four years to undertake implementation, coordination, and monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) activities for Ramsar sites. This was in addition to existing funding for environmental water delivery, funding to improve waterway and catchment health, and fish stocking, which provide some benefit to Ramsar sites. DELWP has strengthened management plans by developing annual action plans for Ramsar sites. The annual action plans facilitate the prioritisation of management plan activities by outlining some estimated costs and resourcing.

It is still difficult to determine the amount of direct funding that is available to Ramsar site managers, as well as the total annual costs required to manage Ramsar sites. A large amount of funding available is fixed term or in the form of one-off payments. Parks Victoria was reliant on fixed term funding or one-off payments for 70% of its Ramsar site management resourcing for the period 2016–20. This hampers long-term planning by CMAs and site managers and the implementation of activities to manage changes to the ecological character of Ramsar sites.

Monitoring and reporting on Ramsar sites

DELWP has established arrangements to oversee how management plans are put into effect and has led the development and implementation of a statewide approach to monitoring the ecological character of Ramsar sites. This is achieved through a specific MERI framework, supported by the online Ramsar Management System (RMS). The first full round of online reporting using the RMS to assess the ecological character of Ramsar sites will occur in 2020–21.

DELWP has collected additional data to establish LAC for all critical components, processes and systems at 10 of the 12 Victorian Ramsar sites. However, the ECDs for these sites have not been updated to incorporate this information. DELWP has been meeting some of its reporting obligations to the Commonwealth, but it is not complying with the requirement that the Ramsar Information Sheets (RIS) for Ramsar sites are updated every six years. RIS provide essential data on each Ramsar site to allow analysis and measure changes to their ecological character

Recommendations

2 Governance arrangements for Ramsar sites

RECOMMENDATION 1: Melbourne Water and Frankston City Council finalise a memorandum of understanding that clarifies the roles and legal responsibilities for the Seaford Wetlands.

14

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in consultation with Ramsar site coordinators and managers, review Traditional Owner engagement across Victoria to inform the implementation of a best practice strategy. The strategy should include clear guidance on how Traditional Owners are engaged in the management of Ramsar sites and the representation of Traditional Owners on site coordinating committees.

20

3 Management of Ramsar sites

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in collaboration with the Catchment Management Authorities and site managers, update the management plans for Victoria's Ramsar sites to include management actions to address high-priority threats such as climate change.

25

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Ramsar management plans contained within Regional Waterway Strategies be reviewed every seven years to comply with the Ramsar Regulations.

26

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning work with Ramsar site coordinating committees to ensure that annual action plans:

- a. link activities to management actions and critical components, processes, and services and
- b. contain appropriate risk registers that comply with the Victorian Government's Risk Management Framework.

31

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the first round of annual action plans in managing Ramsar sites, to inform future annual action plans.

32

RECOMMENDATION 7: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in collaboration with Melbourne Water ensure that the Ecological Character Descriptions for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site are finalised and published as soon as possible.

34

4 Ramsar site funding

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning explore options to establish funding arrangements to ensure that Ramsar site monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement plans can be implemented and the management actions and activities identified in annual action plans can be sustained.

43

RECOMMENDATION 9: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in collaboration with Parks Victoria explore options to establish funding arrangements to ensure that long-term Ramsar site management and monitoring programs can be maintained.

45

RECOMMENDATION 10: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning work with site coordinating committees and Catchment Management Authorities to ensure that all activities listed in Ramsar sites' annual action plans for 2020–21 are costed.

48

RECOMMENDATION 11: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Parks Victoria calculate the ongoing annual costs of managing Victoria's Ramsar sites, to better inform future management of the sites.

50

5 Monitoring Ramsar sites

RECOMMENDATION 12: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning update the Ecological Character Descriptions for Victorian Ramsar sites to reflect new data collected since 2017 to enable effective assessment of, and reporting on, any changes to their ecological character.

56

RECOMMENDATION 13: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning undertake a comprehensive audit of Ramsar sites in Victoria to identify data gaps that exist and implement a plan to prioritise and address these.

57

RECOMMENDATION 14: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in collaboration with site coordinating committees, explore options to effectively coordinate the use of datasets across Victorian Ramsar sites.

58

RECOMMENDATION 15: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and site coordinating committees consider making the state-wide monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) framework and MERI plans for individual Ramsar sites publicly available.

61

RECOMMENDATION 16: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning update the Ramsar Information Sheets for all of Victoria's Ramsar sites and implement policies to ensure that this occurs every six years, as required under the Ramsar Convention.

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Acronyms

BLCAC	Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation
CMA	Catchment Management Authority
CPS	Components, Processes and Services
DELWP	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
ECD	Ecological Character Description
GLaWAC	Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
IAGG	Inter-Agency Governance Group
LAC	Limits of Acceptable Change
MERI	Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement
MLDRIN	Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations
RAP	Registered Aboriginal Party
RIS	Ramsar Information Sheet
RMS	Ramsar Management System
VAGO	Victorian Auditor-General's Office
VNPA	Victorian National Parks Association

Wetlands should be regarded as ‘Crown jewels’, and Ramsar processes provide a platform for protecting the jewels and where necessary, adding some repair and sheen.

Professor Max Finlayson, Charles Sturt University

1.1 Wetlands

Wetlands are distinct ecosystems comprising land which is permanently or periodically covered by water. Lakes, swamps, floodplains, mudflats, marshes, mangroves and lagoons are different kinds of wetlands. Wetlands can be naturally occurring or artificially made. The water within a wetland may be fresh, saline, still or flowing.¹

Wetlands form a critical part of Victoria’s and Australia’s cultural and natural environment. They play a number of important functions, including water purification, water storage, protection of shorelines from erosion, flood impact reduction and pollution absorption. Wetlands also provide habitats for animals and plants and often contain a wide diversity of wildlife.² A range of recreational activities take place in wetlands, such as boating, fishing, hiking and bird-watching. These can also provide economic benefits for communities near the wetlands.³

For Traditional Owners, wetlands have cultural significance as ceremonial and initiation sites, traditional hunting and gathering grounds and as boundary markers. Almost all wetland plants and animals have some form of traditional use as food, fibre, containers, tools, weapons, transport, shelter and medicine. In addition to providing an economic base, wetlands underpin Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, innovation and culture and are fundamental to spiritual beliefs.⁴

There are a range of threats to wetlands that exist, including changed water regimes, water quality issues, development, invasive species and climate change. This makes the conservation and management of wetlands a challenging process.

1 Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, *About Wetlands*, 2020, <<http://www.environment.gov.au/water/wetlands/about>> accessed 1 April 2020.

2 Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Wetlands*, 2019, <<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/waterways-and-catchments/rivers-estuaries-and-waterways/wetlands>> accessed 15 April 2020.

3 Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016–2024*, Ramsar Convention Secretariat, Gland, 2016, pp. 3–4.

4 Department of the Environment, *Wetlands and Indigenous Values*, 2016, <<http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/b04e5e2a-4256-4548-974e-00f7d84670a9/files/factsheet-wetlands-indigenous-values.pdf>>, accessed 10 June 2020.

1.2 The Ramsar Convention

The conservation of wetlands is critical to ensure migratory birds have a suitable habitat for their breeding and non-breeding migratory routes. There are several international agreements in place to protect migratory birds and their habitats, including bilateral treaties between Australia and Japan, China and Korea, along with multilateral intergovernmental agreements.⁵

The first modern treaty between nations aimed at conserving wetlands as a habitat for migratory birds was the *Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat* (the Ramsar Convention). The Ramsar Convention provides an international framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands. The signing of the Ramsar Convention took place in 1971. Its mission is ‘the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world’.⁶ The Ramsar concept of ‘wise use’ of wetlands provides for ‘the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development’.⁷

Under the Ramsar Convention, a variety of natural and artificially-made habitat types can be classified as wetlands. The Ramsar Convention encourages governments to designate wetland sites that contain representative, rare, or unique wetlands types, as well as those that are important for conserving biological diversity. Sites that are designated are added to the Ramsar Convention’s List of Wetlands of International Importance and become listed Ramsar sites. The designation of a wetland as a Ramsar site requires a government to establish and oversee a management framework to conserve the site and ensure its wise use by maintaining the wetland’s ecological character.⁸

There are currently over 170 Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention, which have designated over 2,300 wetland sites around the globe.⁹ Australia was one of the first countries to become a Contracting Party to the Ramsar Convention and has 66 listed Ramsar wetlands and over 900 nationally important wetlands.¹⁰

5 Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Migratory Shorebirds*, 2019, <<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/waterways-and-catchments/rivers-estuaries-and-waterways/wetlands/migratory-shorebirds>> accessed 15 April 2020.

6 Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *The Convention on Wetlands and its Mission*, 2016, <<https://www.ramsar.org/about/the-convention-on-wetlands-and-its-mission>> accessed 1 April 2020.

7 Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, signed 2 February 1971, UNTS 996 (entered into force 21 December 1975), Res IX.1 Annex A.

8 Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, *The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands*, 2020, <<http://environment.gov.au/water/wetlands/ramsar>> accessed 1 April 2020.

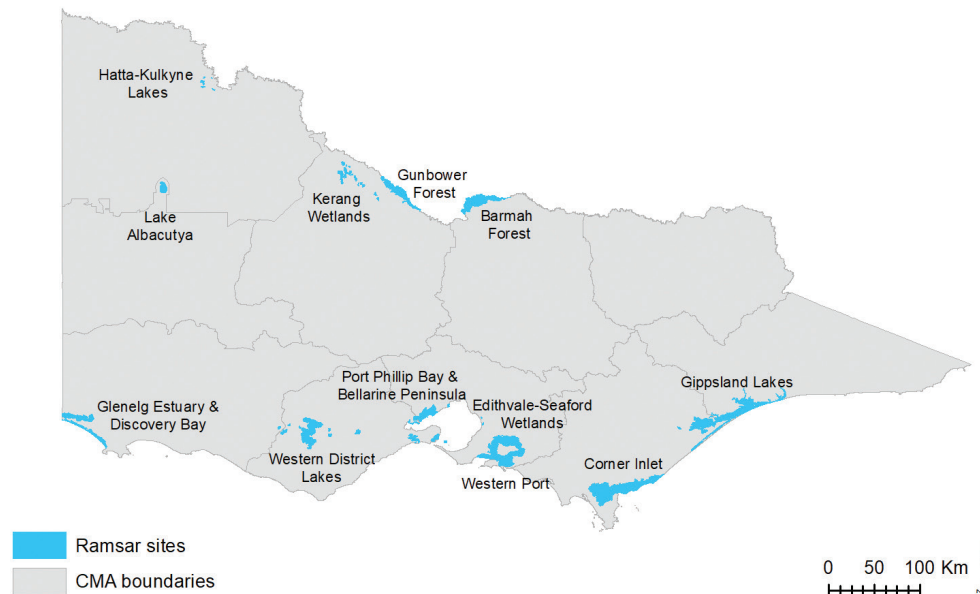
9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

1.3 Victorian Ramsar sites

There are 12 listed Ramsar sites in Victoria (Figure 1.1). The sites cover approximately 332,000 hectares. They are composed of a range of wetland types including estuarine waters, intertidal marshes, freshwater swamp forests and intertidal forested wetlands.

Figure 1.1 Victoria's Ramsar sites



Source: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 4.

Ten of the sites were listed as Ramsar sites in 1982. The Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands site was listed in 2001, while the Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay site was listed in 2018.¹¹

1.4 Ramsar management practices and responsibilities

The Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) found that for Ramsar sites to be managed effectively, clear management practices and responsibilities need to be in place. The Commonwealth Department of the Environment¹² holds overall responsibility for Australia's Ramsar commitment. The responsibility for Ramsar sites in Victoria is shared between the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), Ramsar site managers, and Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs).¹³

¹¹ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Significant Wetlands*, 2019, <<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/waterways-and-catchments/rivers-estuaries-and-waterways/wetlands/significant-wetlands>> accessed 24 February 2020.

¹² The Commonwealth Department with responsibility for the environment has undergone several name changes across the time period that this report spans. For simplicity and to avoid confusion, it will be referred to as the Commonwealth Department of the Environment throughout the report.

¹³ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands: Victorian Auditor-General's Report 2016 17:3*, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Melbourne, 2016, pp. 8-9.

1.4.1 Department of the Environment, Land, Water and Planning

DELWP is the agency responsible for enacting the legislation and policy regarding the management of Victoria's wetlands. Under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) DELWP is required to:

- adhere to national Ramsar guidelines, including management principles, management plans and the requirement to report changes or potential changes in the ecological character of sites to the Commonwealth Government
- coordinate and maintain documents for Ramsar sites, including Ramsar Information Sheets¹⁴ (RIS), Ecological Character Descriptions¹⁵ (ECDs), management plans, site descriptions and maps
- lead the nomination of potential Ramsar sites in consultation with the Commonwealth Government.¹⁶

1.4.2 Site managers

Day-to-day management of Ramsar sites is the responsibility of the site manager. The site manager is the landowner or legal manager of a Ramsar site. The main responsibilities of the site managers are to:

- monitor and detect changes and threats to the ecological character of a site
- implement and address management practices
- report actual or potential changes in ecological character to DELWP.

The primary site managers in Victoria are Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water.¹⁷

Parks Victoria is a statutory authority of the Victorian Government responsible for managing Victoria's diverse range of land and marine parks, which includes 75% of Victoria's wetlands.¹⁸ The organisation also plays a role in managing Melbourne's bays, waterways and other significant cultural assets. It is the primary site manager for 11 of the 12 Ramsar sites located in Victoria. Because of the complex division of land surrounding several Ramsar sites, Parks Victoria manages some wetlands in conjunction with another primary site manager.

¹⁴ Ramsar Information Sheets provide information on wetlands that have been designated under the Ramsar Convention as Wetlands of International Importance and include information on wetland types, ecology, land uses, threats, hydrological values and maps for the site.

¹⁵ An Ecological Character Description refers to the description of the components, processes, benefits and services of a wetland and how they are linked the time of listing.

¹⁶ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

¹⁸ Parks Victoria, *About Us*, 2019, <<https://www.parks.vic.gov.au/about-us>> accessed 1 April 2020.

Melbourne Water is a statutory authority of the Victorian Government responsible for much of the water system in Melbourne, including catchments, reservoirs and the sewerage and drainage system servicing the city.¹⁹ Melbourne Water is the primary site manager for the Edithvale-Seafood Wetlands site and manages part of the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula site in collaboration with Parks Victoria.

1.4.3 Catchment Management Authorities

CMAs are responsible for the integrated planning and coordination of land, water and biodiversity management in their respective catchment and land protection regions. CMAs play a lead role in developing and delivering regional waterway management programs. There are 10 CMAs in Victoria.

At the time of the audit, CMAs were primarily responsible for developing regional waterway strategies (RWS), developing and carrying out various work programs, authorising works on waterways, identifying regional priorities for environmental water management facilitating the delivery of environmental water.²⁰ Catchment management authorities also play a role in managing Victoria's Ramsar sites as most Ramsar site management plans are part of the RWS developed by CMAs.

1.5 Victorian Auditor-General's Office audit

The VAGO report on Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands was tabled in September 2016. The audit examined how effectively Ramsar sites were managed, including how effectively agencies were working with each other, and whether Victoria was meeting its national and international obligations under the Ramsar Convention. In addressing the objective, VAGO assessed whether:

- comprehensive, reliable and current information and effective consultation with stakeholders informed the management of Ramsar wetlands
- comprehensive management plans were in place
- management plans were implemented as intended
- monitoring, evaluation and reporting occur and whether these were used to understand the impact of management activities, inform management practices and meet reporting obligations.²¹

VAGO visited three Ramsar sites during the audit—Gippsland Lakes, Kerang Wetlands and Western District Lakes.

¹⁹ Melbourne Water, *Who We Are*, 2020, <<https://www.melbournewater.com.au/about-us/who-we-are>> accessed 15 April 2020.

²⁰ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

1.5.1 Recommendations

The Auditor-General made the following three recommendations:

1. That the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, in conjunction with Parks Victoria and catchment management authorities:
 - a. develop and implement robust governance arrangements for managing Ramsar sites, including clarifying roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for planning, management and reporting
 - b. strengthen management plans to include time frames and resourcing to ensure that actions are carried out effectively and in a timely way.
2. That the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning:
 - a. oversee the development of a finalised Ramsar management plan for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port sites
 - b. work with catchment management authorities and site managers to develop and assess options for the direct funding of management plan activities focused on high-priority threats that impact on the ecological character of Ramsar sites
 - c. implement arrangements to oversee how management plans are put into effect.
3. That the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning lead the development of a statewide approach to monitoring the ecological character of Ramsar sites, through a specific monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework.

1.5.2 Response from agencies

DELWP, Melbourne Water and the Corangamite CMA accepted the findings and recommendations of the Auditor-General's report. In its response to the audit, DELWP provided a management action plan that outlined how it would work in consultation with CMAs, Parks Victoria, and Melbourne Water to implement the recommendations. These actions included:

- convening an inter-agency governance group to agree on roles and responsibilities, and oversee implementation within each agency
- ensuring that coordination arrangements are in place for managing each Ramsar site, with other stakeholders, including Traditional Owners as appropriate
- overseeing the development of a framework for management plan implementation, which specifies timeframes and resourcing
- finalising the Western Port Ramsar management plan and overseeing the renewal of the Port Phillip Bay and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site management plan
- considering inclusion of priority Ramsar site management actions in the regional investment process delivered under the Our Catchments Our Communities strategy

- improving tracking of management plan implementation
- developing a statewide monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement plan, and overseeing implementation of the plan.

Response to Victorian Auditor-General's Office's follow up survey

DELWP provided VAGO with an update on the status of actions taken in response to the Auditor-General's recommendations in 2018. DELWP stated that all actions undertaken to implement the recommendations were complete.

In response to Recommendation 1, DELWP reported that an interagency governance group has been established. The Department outlined that site coordinators have been appointed for each Ramsar site and appropriate governance structures are in place or site coordinating committees have been established. DELWP further stated that the online Ramsar Management System is in use and improvements are being implemented based on user feedback. The online system was developed as a component of the Ramsar Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement (MERI) Framework.

In response to Recommendation 2, DELWP reported that priority threats to the ecological character of Ramsar sites have been targeted for management. Agency funding is now considered by the site coordination committee when planning annual implementation activities at each site. Proposals have been developed for each using site program logic²² to ensure they targeted threats to ecological character. DELWP also reported that improvement to the tracking of management plan implementation for Ramsar sites has been conducted. Plans are recorded in a database with progress against each activity.

In response to Recommendation 3, DELWP advised that the MERI Framework has been finalised and site MERI plans have been developed and are in the process of being finalised. Implementation for the Ramsar sites' MERI plans is expected to occur over multiple years and will be integrated into routine practice.

1.6 The Committee's approach to its inquiry

The Committee resolved at its meeting on 23 September 2019 to conduct a follow up inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's report. The Committee considered the following:

- a formal submission from DELWP outlining the steps it has taken to address the recommendations in the audit report
- a formal submission and evidence from the Auditor-General on matters that might assist the Committee in addressing the core issues raised in the audit report

²² A program logic is an evaluation tool that explains how an intervention (a project, a program, a policy, a strategy) is understood to contribute to a chain of results that produce the intended or actual impacts.

- evidence obtained from DELWP, Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water, the Auditor-General, and a range of expert witnesses at public hearings held between 2 and 4 December 2019²³
- Victorian Ramsar site annual action plans
- information obtained from site visits to the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands site and Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site.

In addition, the Committee received and accepted 457 public submissions in response to its inquiry. These submissions came from scientists, environmental non-government organisations, community groups, CMAs, and members of the public. Multiple submissions with the title End Duck Shooting in Victoria, and submissions with the title Protect the wetlands of Westernport from AGL's proposed gas terminal were received. The Committee acknowledges and thanks submitters and witnesses for their contribution to the inquiry. Refer to the Appendix for a list of the submissions received.

The Committee has structured its report in line with the main areas of concern identified in the Auditor-General's report, namely:

- governance arrangements for Ramsar sites in Victoria (Chapter 2)
- managing Ramsar sites (Chapter 3)
- resourcing and funding site management (Chapter 4)
- monitoring Ramsar sites (Chapter 5).

The Committee's deliberations during its review were aimed at determining whether the Auditor-General's recommendations have been fully implemented and an effective regime to manage Victoria's Ramsar sites protecting them from decline is in place.

²³ See Appendix for the details of the hearings, including the witnesses that appeared before the Committee.

2.1 Introduction

Ensuring the wise use of Ramsar wetlands and their resources involves collaboration between a range of stakeholders beyond those directly responsible for their management and maintenance, including Traditional Owner groups.²⁴ This highlights the need for effective governance and accountability frameworks to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear at the local, regional and national levels.

The Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) found that the governance, coordination and oversight of Ramsar sites needed to improve for Victoria to effectively meet its obligations.

VAGO recommended:

1. That the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), in conjunction with Parks Victoria and Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs):
 - a. develop and implement robust governance arrangements for managing Ramsar sites, including clarifying roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for planning, management and reporting.²⁵

To determine whether DELWP had effectively implemented VAGO's recommendation, the Committee examined the governance structures put in place by DELWP since the audit. In addition, the Committee considered the role of Traditional Owner groups in the management of Ramsar sites and whether they were being effectively engaged.

The Committee has found that DELWP has addressed VAGO's recommendation, and clarified the governance arrangements for Victorian Ramsar sites. Site coordinating committees for Ramsar sites have been established and the Inter-Agency Governance Group (IAGG) has been convened to improve governance at Ramsar sites and oversee the implementation of agreed agency roles and responsibilities. As a result, there is a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different agencies.

Following the publication of the audit, there are new obligations under the Ramsar convention to engage with Traditional Owners. The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan requires contracting parties to ensure that the knowledge, innovations and practices of the Traditional Owners are integrated in the management of Victorian Ramsar sites. However, this is not occurring in the management of all Ramsar sites in Victoria.

²⁴ Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016–2024*, Ramsar Convention Secretariat, Gland, 2016, p. 7.

²⁵ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. xvi.

2.2 Governance

Effective operational governance arrangements are crucial for managing Victoria's Ramsar sites. A robust governance framework enables Ramsar sites to be managed in a prioritised and risk-based manner.²⁶ Clarity around roles and responsibilities facilitates effective management across all sites and enables the incorporation of accountability mechanisms to deliver improved management outcomes.

Overall, governance arrangements for Ramsar sites in Victoria are complex and involve several agencies. At the time of the audit, VAGO found that the governance of Ramsar sites was poor, and that roles and responsibilities for specific actions were not always clear or documented. Site managers would follow their agency's planning priorities and were not held to account for delivering the actions outlined in Ramsar site management plans.²⁷

VAGO recommended that DELWP work in conjunction with Parks Victoria and CMAs to develop and implement robust governance arrangements for managing Ramsar sites.²⁸

While there are always challenges and opportunities for improvement, DELWP and its partner agencies have effectively implemented new governance arrangements. Roles and responsibilities have been clarified, which have improved responsible agencies' capacity to manage Ramsar sites.

2.2.1 Roles and responsibilities for Ramsar site management

Following the tabling of the audit, DELWP worked with CMAs and Parks Victoria to convene the IAGG in June 2017.²⁹ The IAGG's intended role is to provide governance, oversight and coordination across agencies responsible for Ramsar management in Victoria. Membership of the IAGG is made up of senior representatives from DELWP, Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water and CMAs. The IAGG meets twice per year and key agenda items include implementation of roles and responsibilities and resourcing.³⁰

In addition to the IAGG, DELWP established three key roles for Ramsar site management in Victoria and assigned responsibility for these roles:

- Ramsar statewide coordinator (DELWP)
- Ramsar site coordinators (CMAs and Melbourne Water)
- Ramsar site managers: (Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water for most sites).

²⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. xvi.

²⁹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Submission 21*, p. 11.

³⁰ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p.5.

Statewide coordinator

DELWP is the Ramsar statewide coordinator. Through this role it oversees the implementation of Ramsar Convention obligations in Victoria and convenes the IAGG. DELWP is also responsible for reporting to the Australian Ramsar Administrative Authority within the Commonwealth Department of the Environment and keeping Ramsar site documentation up-to-date.³¹ Under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) DELWP is required to:

- adhere to national Ramsar guidelines, including management principles, management plans and the requirement to report changes or potential changes in the ecological character of sites to the Commonwealth Government
- coordinate and maintain documents for Ramsar sites, including Ramsar Information Sheets³² (RIS), Ecological Character Descriptions³³ (ECDs), management plans, site descriptions and maps
- lead the nomination of potential Ramsar sites in consultation with the Commonwealth Government.³⁴

Table 2.1 Roles and responsibilities for Victorian Ramsar sites, 2019

Ramsar site	Site coordinators	Site manager/s
Barmah Forest	Goulburn-Broken CMA	Parks Victoria, Yorta Yorta Traditional Owner Land Management Board
Corner Inlet	West Gippsland CMA	Parks Victoria
Edithvale-Seafood Wetlands	Melbourne Water	Melbourne Water
Gippsland Lakes	East Gippsland CMA	Parks Victoria, DELWP Gippsland
Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay	Glenelg-Hopkins CMA	Parks Victoria
Gunbower Forest	North Central CMA	Parks Victoria, DELWP Loddon Mallee
Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes	Mallee CMA	Parks Victoria
Kerang Wetlands	North Central CMA	Parks Victoria, Goulburn-Murray Water
Lake Albacutya	Wimmera CMA	Parks Victoria
Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula	Corangamite CMA	Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water
Western District Lakes	Corangamite CMA	Parks Victoria
Western Port	Port Phillip and Westernport CMA	Parks Victoria, DELWP Gippsland

Source: DELWP Submission, p.6

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ramsar Information Sheets provide information on wetlands that have been designated under the Ramsar Convention as Wetlands of International Importance and include information on wetland types, ecology, land uses, threats, hydrological values and maps for the site.

³³ An Ecological Character Description refers to the description of the components, processes, benefits and services of a wetland and how they are linked the time of listing.

³⁴ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 8.

Ramsar site coordinators

Ramsar site coordinators oversee the implementation of Ramsar site management plans and monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) plans.³⁵ For 11 of the 12 sites, the site coordinator role sits within the respective CMA. Melbourne Water is the site coordinator for the Edithvale-Seaford Ramsar site.

Ramsar site coordinators are also responsible for establishing and convening site coordinating committees. Site coordinating committees are a new form of governance body, established as part of DELWP's response to VAGO's recommendation, which are made up of agency partners under agreed terms of reference.

Site coordinators are responsible for developing an annual action plan³⁶ for their respective Ramsar site, in consultation with the coordinating committee. Site coordinators track the ecological character of Ramsar sites and report any potential changes to the statewide coordinator.

In its submission to the inquiry, DELWP stated that all 12 coordinating committees have been initiated and meet at least twice annually.³⁷

Ramsar site managers

The Ramsar site manager is the agency that has land management responsibility for the respective Ramsar site. Parks Victoria is currently the sole manager for five Ramsar sites in Victoria, and shares management responsibilities for six sites. Melbourne Water is the land manager for Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands Ramsar site and parts of the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site. Ramsar site managers are responsible for taking part in site coordinating committee activities, implementing agreed upon actions and reporting any indications of potential changes in the ecological character of a site.³⁸

Agencies involved in Ramsar management agreed that governance arrangements have seen improvement since the Audit. Dr Mark Norman, Chief Conservation Scientist, Parks Victoria, outlined that Parks Victoria is now in a much better position than before the VAGO report, stating that:

... we have annual actions plans, we prioritise on-ground actions—that is done in a very collaborative way—and we pool and seek and secure resources across all those agencies to be better and more effective in this space.³⁹

³⁵ These are high-level strategic documents that are used to guide the management of Victoria's Ramsar sites. They are explained in more detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

³⁶ Annual action plans are documents that outline priority actions that will be undertaken each year for a Ramsar site, including funding requirements and responsibility for delivery. These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

³⁷ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 6.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Dr Mark Norman, Chief Conservation Scientist, Parks Victoria, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

FINDING 2: Governance arrangements for Ramsar sites have been reviewed and improved since the tabling of the Auditor-General’s report. The Inter-Agency Governance Group has been established, clarifying roles and responsibilities for managing Ramsar sites. Ramsar site coordinators have also established coordinating committees for all 12 Victorian Ramsar sites.

2.3 Site-specific arrangements

As part of its inquiry, the Committee visited the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands and the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar sites to examine site-specific roles, responsibilities and governance arrangements. The Committee also sought to understand the level of consultation and engagement occurring between government agencies and non-government stakeholders and how this has evolved since the audit.

2.3.1 Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands—case study

Located to the south-east of Melbourne, the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands Ramsar site is the largest natural wetland of its type in the Port Phillip and Westernport basins. It is all that remains of Carrum Carrum Swamp, which once covered more than 4,000 hectares from Mordialloc in the north to Frankston in the south.⁴⁰

As part of its examination of governance arrangements for Ramsar sites, VAGO found that clear governance arrangements had been established for the Edithvale-Seaford wetlands. Uniquely, Melbourne Water was both the site manager and management plan owner for the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands site. VAGO found that the site had clear accountabilities for managing and monitoring the site and noted that the arrangements should be used as a better-practice model.⁴¹

Under the new arrangements established by DELWP, the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands are managed by Melbourne Water, who also are the site coordinator for the site. However, the Frankston City Council is the landowner for part of the Seaford Wetlands.⁴² As a result, the Frankston City Council also plays a role in the day-to-day management of this site and is responsible for the implementation of several management activities.⁴³

⁴⁰ Melbourne Water, *Edithvale-Seaford Wetland*, 2019, <<https://www.melbournewater.com.au/community-and-education/about-our-water/rivers-and-creeks/edithvale-seaford-wetland>> accessed 1 April 2020.

⁴¹ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 19.

⁴² Darren G. Quin, et al., *Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands Ramsar Site Management Plan*, report prepared by Ecology Australia, report for Melbourne Water, 2016, pp. 11–16.

⁴³ Ms Elizabeth Warren, Coordinator Environmental Planning, Frankston City Council, Public hearing, Chelsea Heights, 3 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

In evidence provided to the Committee, the Frankston City Council stated that a mechanism for management and governance is under discussion with Melbourne Water, and that a memorandum of understanding and exchange of land tenure are being considered. Ms Elizabeth Warren, Coordinator Environmental Planning, Frankston Council, stated that:

... with our collaboration in terms of management agreements and governance we have had quite a few conversations with Melbourne Water trying to sort out that legal responsibility of who is responsible for what. As we mentioned in our statement, we manage some parts that are legally Melbourne Water and vice versa. We are just trying to work out a way forward in making that formalised.⁴⁴

Ms Margaret Hunter, Secretary, Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands, outlined that the group felt involved in the governance process for the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands Ramsar site by Melbourne Water. Ms Hunter also noted that there is a good working relationship between the two organisations, as well as with Frankston City Council.⁴⁵

FINDING 3: Effective collaborative governance arrangements are in place for the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands, which reflect the Victorian Auditor-General's Office's findings in 2016. However, Melbourne Water and Frankston City Council's responsibilities for the Seaford Wetlands have not yet been formalised.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Melbourne Water and Frankston City Council finalise a memorandum of understanding that clarifies the roles and legal responsibilities for the Seaford Wetlands.

2.3.2 Gippsland Lakes Wetlands—case study

The Gippsland Lakes Ramsar Site is located around 300 kilometres east of Melbourne and extends from Sale Common east to Lake Tyers covering an area of approximately 60,000 hectares. The site comprises a series of coastal lagoons formed behind a barrier dune system.⁴⁶ Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, advised the Committee that governance of the Gippsland Lakes site is complex, owing to its expanse. The Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site spans two CMA regions and multiple local government areas, with public land that is primarily managed by Parks Victoria and DELWP.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ms Margaret Hunter, Secretary, Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands, Public hearing, Chelsea Heights, 3 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

⁴⁶ East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, *Gippsland Lakes Ramsar Site Management Plan*, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, Bairnsdale, 2015, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, Public hearing, Sale, 4 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

VAGO previously found that the Gippsland Lakes site provided a better practice example of clear governance arrangements. The East Gippsland CMA had clearly outlined responsibility for management actions and activities within the site, and at the time of the audit had commenced plans to establish a multi-agency steering committee for the site.⁴⁸

The Committee found that governance of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site was sound and one of the better practice examples throughout the state. Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, advised the Committee that:

This governance arrangement was in place before the VAGO audit, or very shortly afterwards, but it does reflect and align with the recommended governance arrangements that fall out of the VAGO audit. We have got a ministerially appointed committee, the Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee, which is in place largely to help the disbursement and the implementation of the funds associated with the Gippsland Lakes program. We then have a group called the Gippsland Lakes delivery managers. They are operational decision-makers, so operations managers from the land and waterway managers that sit around the lakes, the Traditional Owners, and they lead coordination and collaboration. That is about forming programs of work and identifying opportunities to work together, and that is where the Ramsar coordinating committee in the VAGO context sits in our governance structure. The delivery managers, which were in existence before, then became the Ramsar site coordinating committee for this purpose in the DELWP framework.

We then have things called priority program area coordination groups, which are essentially just a subset. They are convened by members of the delivery managers and they help focus work on important areas around the lakes, and that is guided by the Ramsar site management plan.⁴⁹

The Committee also heard evidence from Field and Game Australia (Sale Branch) regarding the management of wetlands in the Gippsland area and more broadly. Mr Gary Howard, Project Manager, Heart Morass rehabilitation project, Wetlands Environmental Taskforce, advised that the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority manages the Heart Morass wetlands site under a joint management arrangement. To facilitate this, Field and Game have established a memorandum of understanding with the East Gippsland CMA.⁵⁰ Mr John Hirt, President, Field and Game Australia (Sale Branch), stated that engagement with the authority has been excellent.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 19.

⁴⁹ Mr Sean Phillipson, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 15–16.

⁵⁰ Mr Gary Howard, Project Manager, Heart Morass rehabilitation project, Wetlands Environmental Taskforce, Public hearing, Sale, 4 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁵¹ Mr John Hirt, President, Field and Game Australia (Sale Branch), Public hearing, Sale, 4 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

FINDING 4: The Committee found that governance of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site was sound and one of the better practice examples throughout the state. The East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority has established effective mechanisms to manage the site, including arrangements with key stakeholder groups.



Black Bream. Photo Credit: Sean Phillipson, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority.

2.4 Traditional Owners and governance of Ramsar sites

Since its adoption, the Ramsar Convention has increasingly recognised the cultural importance of wetlands, and their value to indigenous peoples.⁵² This culminated in the adoption of the Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016–2024, which recognises that the wise and customary use of wetlands by indigenous peoples and local communities can play an important role in their conservation. The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan was published in September 2016, and sets a target that:

... the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities relevant for the wise use of wetlands and their customary use of wetland resources are documented, respected, subject to national legislation and relevant international obligations, and fully integrated and reflected in the implementation of the Convention, with a full and effective participation of indigenous peoples and local communities at all relevant levels.⁵³

⁵² Karen Denyer, et al., *Learning from Experience: How indigenous peoples and local communities contribute to wetland conservation in Asia and Oceania*, Ramsar Secretariat, Gland, 2018, p. 8.

⁵³ Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016–2024*, p. 10.

This target was not addressed in the Auditor-General's report. The Committee notes the important connection between Traditional Owners and wetlands in Victoria. Traditional Owners have used and conserved wetlands for millennia, and these areas continue to be of high cultural importance. While there is some good engagement and consultation with Traditional Owners in the management and governance of Victoria's Ramsar sites,⁵⁴ the Committee received some evidence indicating this is not universal across the state.

2.4.1 Background

During the inquiry process, the Committee sought the input of Traditional Owner groups to understand their involvement in the management of Ramsar wetlands in Victoria. The Committee received submissions from Traditional Owner groups, including:

- the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (BLCAC)
- the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC)
- the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN).

The Committee also received submissions from Aboriginal Land Management companies such as Barapa Land and Water.

2.4.2 Importance of Ramsar sites to Traditional Owners

The BLCAC outlined their extensive knowledge of wetlands and the issues that require management and intervention. In their submission they noted the critical nature Ramsar wetlands play in the protection of habitats for migratory birds and other animals. There is a strong connection between wetland sites and Traditional Owners, primarily due to the stories, food and landscapes they encompass. The submission noted that the Edithvale-Seaford site is now a small part of a much larger swamp which was once an important gathering place, housing traditional resources and representing a preserved piece of habitat with varying purposes and values.⁵⁵

In their submission, MLDRIN noted that all of Victoria's Ramsar wetlands are of cultural significance to Traditional Owners. The wetlands within the Victorian Murray Darling Basin 'are of particular significance to First Nations as sources of sustenance underpinning a cultural economy and as a focal point for creation stories, spirituality and cultural identity'.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ For example, the Yorta Yorta Traditional Owner Land Management Board have a joint management agreement with the State of Victoria for the Barmah Forest National Park, which includes the Ramsar site. Unfortunately, the Inquiry did not receive a submission from Yorta Yorta Traditional Owner Land Management Board.

⁵⁵ Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, *Submission 457*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, *Submission 422*, pp. 1-2.

2.4.3 Involvement and engagement in the management of Ramsar sites

In their submission the GLaWAC suggested that there have been positive developments since the Auditor-General's report was tabled. The increase in resources aimed at improving coordination and implementing priority actions has helped to clarify roles and responsibilities surrounding the management of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site.

Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, informed the Committee that the management strategy for the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site clearly outlined the involvement of Traditional Owner groups. This included a program of works on the outer barrier of the site, which is coordinated by the GLaWAC.⁵⁷ The involvement of the GLaWAC in the management of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site was also highlighted in the Australian Government's National Ramsar Report to the 13th Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention.⁵⁸

The GLaWAC advised the Committee that their inclusion in the coordinating committees for Gippsland Lakes and Corner Inlet, the Gippsland Lakes delivery managers group and involvement in several joint projects has been viewed as beneficial by the group.⁵⁹

GLaWAC hope that the coordination of environmental managers and funding of priority projects will continue as a long-term commitment for Victoria to meet its obligations under the Ramsar Convention. The group believes that a lasting focus on wetlands management would result in the cultural and Traditional Owner knowledge being more effectively integrated into site management.⁶⁰

FINDING 5: Traditional Owners have been effectively engaged in the management of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site. This ensures that the knowledge, innovations and practices of the Traditional Owners are integrated in the management of the site and reflects the target set for contracting parties in the Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan.

In their submission, the MLDRIN raised long held concerns regarding the condition of Ramsar sites, ongoing threats to their ecological and cultural character and the inadequate involvement of Traditional Owners in their management and restoration.⁶¹

There has been minimal consultation with the BLCAC in the management of the two Ramsar sites that lie within its area of responsibility as a Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP). BLCAC believes their role in managing the Edithvale-Seaford site is complex,

⁵⁷ Mr Sean Phillipson, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Department of the Environment and Energy, *Australia's National Report to the 13th Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention*, Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra, 2018, p. 36.

⁵⁹ Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, *Submission 24*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, *Submission 422*, p. 2.

unclear and tends to resemble a box-ticking exercise with little meaningful engagement. The BLCAC indicated that a similar situation existed for the Westernport Ramsar site.⁶²

BLCAC contended that government agencies are unaware of their obligations of when and where to engage with Traditional Owners on Ramsar site management and planning issues.⁶³ In addressing the challenges that exist in managing Ramsar sites from a Traditional Owner perspective, BLCAC stated that:

There are tensions that exist in the management of Ramsar sites in Victoria. For example, there are tensions between the Aboriginal groups and user groups, such as bird watchers. Moreover, there is a multiplicity of land owners and managers, resulting in tensions directly related to wetland management. The lack of clarity of roles is a problem in the Government's approach to wetlands management. The demarcation is not clear and while the Government has substantial resources at its disposal, this has not always translated to good management practices.⁶⁴

At the public hearings, Melbourne Water was asked about engagement with the local indigenous community. Mr Woodland, Manager, Regional Services (South East) at Melbourne Water, outlined that:

We are working through a process now to understand the best way to engage with the Traditional Owners at our various sites, and that includes for this site. So that is something we are working through. I note that this site is still contested, in a contested area, so we are taking expert advice and working on the best way that Traditional Owners want to be engaged with this site.⁶⁵

The BLCAC is recognised by the Victorian Government as the RAP for the area that encompasses the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands Ramsar site.⁶⁶ The BLCAC in their written submission stated that 'Melbourne Water has met probably once with the BLCAC in the past five years, with the relationship between the two organisations deteriorating over the past two years'.⁶⁷ The Council found Melbourne Water's processes reactive and outlined that views of the BLCAC were only sought in response to complaints from the public. The Committee notes that the BLCAC is not represented on the Melbourne Water Committee of Management for the Edithvale-Seaford wetlands.⁶⁸

⁶² Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, *Submission 457*, p. 3.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶⁵ Mr John Woodland, Manager Regional Services, Melbourne Water, Public hearing, Chelsea Heights, 3 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, *Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation: Contact details and registration history for the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation*, 2019, <<https://www.aboriginalheritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/bunurong-land-council-aboriginal-corporation>> accessed 8 April 2020.

⁶⁷ Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, *Submission 457*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

The BLCAC stated that Traditional Owners should be incorporated into the beginning of any land management process, rather than at its conclusion:

Ramsar sites in Bunurong country are as important culturally as they are for migratory birds and conservation. Recognition of First peoples in the management of these sites needs serious and meaningful improvement.⁶⁹

FINDING 6: Meaningful engagement with Traditional Owners is not embedded across all Victorian Ramsar sites. This limits site managers' ability to incorporate the knowledge and practices of Traditional Owner groups in Ramsar site management, in line with the Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in consultation with Ramsar site coordinators and managers, review Traditional Owner engagement across Victoria to inform the implementation of a best practice strategy. The strategy should include clear guidance on how Traditional Owners are engaged in the management of Ramsar sites and the representation of Traditional Owners on site coordinating committees.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

3

Management of Ramsar sites

3.1 Summary

The effective management of Ramsar sites is central to ensuring their wise use and conservation.⁷⁰ In its 2016 audit, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) raised concerns around the management of Victoria's Ramsar sites and concluded that there was limited evidence that all sites were being effectively managed and protected from decline.⁷¹

VAGO recommended:

1. That the Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (DELWP), in conjunction with Parks Victoria and Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs):
 - b. strengthen management plans to include time frames and resourcing to ensure that actions are carried out effectively and in a timely way.
2. That DELWP:
 - a. oversee the development of finalised Ramsar management plans for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port sites
 - b. work with catchment management authorities and site managers to develop and assess options for the direct funding of management plan activities focused on high priority threats that impact on the ecological character of Ramsar sites, and
 - c. implement arrangements to oversee how management plans are put into effect.⁷²

To determine the progress made by DELWP in implementing VAGO's recommendations, the Committee examined evidence provided to the inquiry through submissions and public hearings. The Committee also considered key Ramsar documents, such as Ramsar management plans and Ecological Character Descriptions (ECDs)⁷³ and requested documents from CMAs. The Committee focused on understanding the impact of the frameworks established by DELWP on the outcomes achieved for Ramsar sites and the consequences of any shortcomings that were identified.

⁷⁰ Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *New Guidelines for management planning for Ramsar sites and other wetlands: Adopted by Resolution VIII.14 (2002) of the Ramsar Convention* Ramsar Convention Secretariat, Gland, 2002, p. 2.

⁷¹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands: Victorian Auditor-General's Report 2016 17:3*, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Melbourne, 2016, p. x.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁷³ An Ecological Character Description of a wetland is a document that should be prepared at the time of a Ramsar site's listing, which provides the baseline description of the wetland at a given point in time and can be used to assess changes in the ecological character of these sites.

DELWP has addressed VAGO's recommendations by establishing a framework to strengthen the management of Ramsar sites and finalising the management plans for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port Ramsar sites. The annual action plans developed by DELWP facilitate the work of site managers to target key threats to Ramsar sites, although it is too early to determine their effectiveness. The plans vary in quality and the Committee has identified opportunities for their improvement.

The Committee has also identified some areas of concern that remain unaddressed since VAGO's audit. The majority of Ramsar management plans have not been updated since VAGO's audit was tabled in 2016. This means that a number of issues identified by VAGO, which will impact the long-term management of the ecological character of these sites, have not been addressed. The ECD for Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula has been in draft form since 2011 and remains unpublished.

In addition, three Victorian Ramsar sites are currently undergoing a formal assessment to determine if their limits of acceptable change⁷⁴ (LAC) have been exceeded. During the inquiry, the Committee received evidence regarding the ecological character of two of these sites, which is presented below.

3.2 Ramsar site management plans

The Ramsar Convention obliges signatories to prepare management plans that promote the sustainable use of wetlands.⁷⁵ A management plan should:

- capture the current status of the site including any threats
- establish realistic goals and achievable objectives to maintain the site
- articulate how the goals and objectives will be realised and prioritised in a prescriptive action plan.⁷⁶

Robust management plans based on a comprehensive understanding of the ecological character of a Ramsar site are central to effective management. These plans assist site managers in identifying and prioritising actions to conserve the ecological character of a site as well as identifying and mitigating threats.⁷⁷

In Australia, the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) (the EPBC Act) establishes a framework for managing Ramsar wetlands. Schedule 6 of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2000* (Cth) (the Regulations) outlines the general principles for the development of

⁷⁴ Limits of acceptable change are the acceptable variation limits of an ecological characteristic or process in a Ramsar site, established at the time of listing.

⁷⁵ Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *Management planning for Ramsar sites and other wetlands: Adopted by Resolution V.7 (1993) of the Ramsar Convention*, Ramsar Convention Secretariat, Gland, 1993.

⁷⁶ Ramsar Regional Centre - East Asia, *The Designation and Management of Ramsar sites: A Practitioner's Guide*, Ramsar Regional Centre - East Asia, Changwon City, 2017, p. 15.

⁷⁷ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 12.

Ramsar management plans. These principles recommend that management plans be reviewed every seven years.⁷⁸ DELWP must adhere to these guidelines and coordinate Ramsar site management plans to comply with its obligations under the EPBC Act.⁷⁹

VAGO found that the management plans developed for Ramsar sites did not meet the requirements under the Australian Ramsar management principles. The plans did not comprise a comprehensive management framework. Eight of the plans only partly addressed the stated threats to ecological character, as they did not include management actions to address all the identified risks.⁸⁰ One of the management plans was out of date, and another was not finalised.

VAGO recommended that DELWP strengthen management plans to include time frames and resourcing to ensure that actions are carried out effectively and in a timely way and oversee the development of finalised Ramsar management plans for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port sites.

The Committee examined the management plans for Victoria's Ramsar sites and considered evidence from submissions and public hearings. The Committee also sought to establish whether the management plans had been updated to address VAGO's findings and align with the Australian Ramsar management principles.

DELWP has addressed VAGO's recommendation that it oversee the development of finalised Ramsar management plans for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port sites. However nine of the 12 site management plans have not been updated since the audit was tabled and are not scheduled for review until 2022 at the earliest, with some sites later than this. This means that the deficiencies identified by VAGO have not been addressed. The documents do not align with the Australian Ramsar management principles or address key threats to the ecological character of Ramsar sites. This has the potential to have a negative impact on the long-term management of the ecological character of these sites.

3.2.1 Issues with Ramsar management plans

As part of its audit, VAGO undertook an assessment of the management plans for Victorian Ramsar sites based on their adherence to the management principles of the Regulations. VAGO found that none of the plans met all of the principles outlined in the Regulations needed to be considered a comprehensive management framework.⁸¹ In addition, eight of the 10 plans analysed in the audit only partly addressed the stated threats to ecological character contained within them.⁸² Identified risks from recreational activity, changes in water quality and climate change were rarely addressed

⁷⁸ *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2000* (Cth) sch 6.

⁷⁹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 8.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁸² VAGO's analysis included the draft management plan for Western Port. Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula did not have a management plan at the time of the audit and was rated as 'not met' for all categories.

through actions in the management plans.⁸³ The current status of the Ramsar site management plans is outlined in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Ramsar site management plans

Ramsar Site	Current management plan developed	Plan type	Update required
Barmah Forest	2014	Waterway Strategy	2022
Corner Inlet	2014	Waterway Strategy	2022
Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands	2016	Site-specific	2023
Gippsland Lakes	2015	Site-specific	2022
Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay	2017	Site-specific	2024
Gunbower Forest	2014	Waterway Strategy	2022
Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes	2014	Waterway Strategy	2022
Kerang Wetlands	2014	Waterway Strategy	2022
Lake Albacutya	2014	Waterway Strategy	2022
Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula	2018	Site-specific	2025
Western District Lakes	2014	Waterway Strategy	2022
Western Port	2017	Site-specific	2024

Source: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Significant Wetlands, 2019*, <<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/waterways-and-catchments/rivers-estuaries-and-waterways/wetlands/significant-wetlands>>, accessed 20 January 2020.

Of the 10 site management plans that were assessed by VAGO, two have been updated since the audit was published and addressed VAGO's concerns.⁸⁴ However, the remaining eight plans have not been updated, as such the issues found by VAGO in 2016 have not been addressed. Under the Regulations, reviews of the management plans are not required to take place until 2022 at the earliest.

The Committee received evidence from a range of stakeholders regarding the threats posed to Ramsar wetlands by changes in water quality and climate change. Mr John Woodland, Manager, Regional Services, Melbourne Water, stated to the Committee that climate change and increasing salinity were a significant threat to the Ramsar sites managed by Melbourne Water.⁸⁵ Dr Mark Norman, Chief Conservation Scientist, Parks Victoria, also stated that the increasing impact of climate change was being seen more and more.⁸⁶ Mr Mark Taylor, Assistant Secretary, Wetlands Policy and Northern Water Use Branch, Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Energy, advised

⁸³ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 17.

⁸⁴ A new management plan for the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands was released on 26 September 2016, and the final version of the Western Port management plan was released in 2017.

⁸⁵ Mr John Woodland, Manager Regional Services, Melbourne Water, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

⁸⁶ Dr Mark Norman, Chief Conservation Scientist, Parks Victoria, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

the Committee that the serious challenges that were facing Ramsar site managers included water resource development and climate change.⁸⁷

Management plans provide the mechanism that facilitates the wise use of wetlands and are an essential element in maintaining the ecological character of Ramsar sites.⁸⁸ Acknowledging the potential impact on Ramsar sites by climate change and changing water quality, it is of concern to the Committee that the established management plans for Victoria's Ramsar sites have not been updated to include actions that address these threats.

The importance of management plans for Ramsar sites was reflected in the Auditor-General's recommendations 1b and 2 a-c.

FINDING 7: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning has not updated all the management plans for Ramsar sites to ensure they adhere with the management principles for Ramsar sites. As result, most of the management plans still do not include actions to address high-priority threats, as recommended by the Auditor-General.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in collaboration with the Catchment Management Authorities and site managers, update the management plans for Victoria's Ramsar sites to include management actions to address high-priority threats such as climate change.

3.2.2 Regional Waterway Strategies and site management

At the time of the audit, of the 11 Ramsar sites in Victoria:

- seven had management plans embedded within Regional Waterway Strategies (RWS)
- three had standalone plans, of which one was in a draft state
- one site did not have a management plan in place.⁸⁹

In its submission to the inquiry, DELWP stated that management planning for seven Ramsar sites is still contained within the relevant regional waterway strategies.⁹⁰ This is consistent with guidance in the *Victorian Waterway Strategy* (the Strategy), which states that 'regional waterway strategies will incorporate Ramsar site management planning, unless the complexity of management arrangements for the site warrants an

⁸⁷ Mr Mark Taylor, Assistant Secretary, Wetlands Policy and Northern Water Use Branch, Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Energy, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 42.

⁸⁸ Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *New Guidelines for management planning for Ramsar sites and other wetlands*, p. 2.

⁸⁹ At the time of the audit, Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula did not have a current management plan, and the management plan for Western Port was still in draft form.

⁹⁰ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 7.

individual management plan'.⁹¹ The Strategy requires that management plans contained within waterway strategies are consistent with the management planning arrangements for Ramsar sites set out in the Regulations.⁹²

In Victoria, the regional waterway strategies set out the regional management program for rivers, wetlands and estuaries over an eight-year timeframe (Table 3.1). This is inconsistent with the timeframe set out in the Regulations that Ramsar site's management plan is updated every seven years. The standalone plans have been reviewed every seven years.

FINDING 8: The timelines for updating Ramsar management plans contained within regional waterway strategies are not aligned with the timeframe set out in the Regulations that a Ramsar site's management plan is reviewed every seven years.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Ramsar management plans contained within Regional Waterway Strategies be reviewed every seven years to comply with the Ramsar Regulations.

3.2.3 Development of management plans for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port sites

At the time that the audit was conducted, current management plans were not in place for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port sites. VAGO recommended that DELWP oversee the development of a finalised Ramsar management plan for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port site.⁹³

In its submission to the Committee, DELWP stated that management plans for both sites had been completed and were currently being implemented.⁹⁴ Dr Amber Clarke, Director, Waterways Programs, DELWP, advised the Committee that the management plan actions were accepted as complete by DELWP's Risk and Audit Committee in mid-2018.⁹⁵ The management plans can be accessed on the DELWP website.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Department of Environment and Primary Industries, *Victorian Waterway Management Strategy*, Department of Environment and Primary Industries, Melbourne, 2013, p. 172.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁹³ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. xvi.

⁹⁴ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 8.

⁹⁵ Dr Amber Clarke, Director Waterways Programs, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Significant Wetlands*, 2019, <<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/waterways-and-catchments/rivers-estuaries-and-waterways/wetlands/significant-wetlands>> accessed 20 January 2020.

FINDING 9: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning has addressed the Victorian Auditor-General's recommendation that it oversee the development of a finalised Ramsar management plan for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula and Western Port sites.

3.3 Annual action plans

To address VAGO's recommendation that it strengthen the management plans for sites to include time frames and resourcing, DELWP committed to the development of a framework for management plan implementation.⁹⁷ Central to this framework was the development of annual action plans for Ramsar sites. These are developed every 12 months by the site's coordinating committee to guide the implementation of site management plans. Dr Amber Clarke, Director, Waterways Programs, DELWP, advised the Committee that the annual action plans:

... look at all of the available funding that is available over the coming 12 months and work out what are the priority actions that need to be addressed to address threats to ecological character, and then they assign responsibility to different agencies and work out how much funding can be allocated to those actions.⁹⁸

In a follow-up survey completed for VAGO in December 2018, DELWP reported key improvements and outcomes resulting from its strengthening of management plans, stating that:

The annual action plans developed by site coordination committees identify priority actions (informed by monitoring data) to be undertaken each year to implement the site management plan. This ensures that timeframes and resourcing are identified, and actions are timely. The monitoring of site management plan implementation is enabled by the online Ramsar management system, the efficiency (effectiveness) of management actions is monitored as per the site MERI plan.⁹⁹

DELWP reported that action regarding this recommendation was completed in June 2018.¹⁰⁰

DELWP has led the development of annual action Plans for Ramsar sites to address VAGO's recommendations to improve its management planning. All twelve site coordinating committees have developed an annual action plan for the Ramsar sites they oversight and provided them to the Committee. The quality of the Annual Action Plans provided to the Committee varied. Although most of the plans contained the information required by DELWP, the Committee has identified some opportunities for improvement. In particular, the risk registers contained in the plans need to be

⁹⁷ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 7.

⁹⁸ Dr Amber Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

⁹⁹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Submission 21*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

strengthened to ensure the success of activities designed to maintain or improve Ramsar sites' ecological character. As the annual action plans are only in the early stages of implementation, the Committee was unable to assess their effectiveness.

3.3.1 Assessment of annual action plans

Annual action plans are developed by site coordinating committees and follow a pre-defined structure in a template provided by DELWP. The documents are divided into five key areas:

- an overview
- a prioritisation process
- an activity table
- an activity location map
- a risks and issues register.

The Committee reviewed the Annual Action Plans to determine whether they included all five key areas. The results are presented in Table 3.2. The Committee also examined the risk registers and activity tables in the annual action plans and whether they facilitated the effective management of Ramsar sites.

Table 3.2 Assessment of annual action plans

Ramsar Site	Overview	Prioritisation process	Activity table	Activity location map	Risk and issues register
Barmah Forest	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Corner Inlet	No	No	Yes	No	No
Edithvale-Seafood Wetlands	Yes	Partial	Yes	No	No
Gippsland Lakes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gunbower Forest	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kerang Wetlands	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lake Albacutya	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Western District Lakes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Western Port	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Source: Analysis of internal documentation supplied by CMAs and Melbourne Water.

Activity tables

The site activity tables within the annual action plans require site coordinating committees to list the actions that will be prioritised for the financial year, as well as their outputs, and the management actions and critical components, processes, and services (CPS) that they relate to. Other information included in the activity table is the estimated timeframe for completion of an activity, its estimated cost¹⁰¹ and the responsible agencies.

Although all of the sites' annual action plans contained activity tables, the composition of these tables varied. The number of activities listed ranged from 58 in the annual action plan for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site, to four activities identified for the Lake Albacutya Ramsar site. A total of 353 activities were identified across all 12 annual action plans.

DELWP's submission to the inquiry stated that coordinating committees must demonstrate how activities in action plans align with the outcome of maintaining or improving the ecological character of the site.¹⁰² If relevant management actions and critical CPS are not aligned to activities listed in the annual action plans, it limits the ability of site coordinating committees to effectively prioritise their efforts and demonstrate how their actions are benefiting the Ramsar site they oversee. Of the 353 activities, 86% were aligned to a relevant management action plan, and 89% were aligned to a relevant critical CPS.

The template developed by DELWP states that activities listed in the annual action plan should be assigned a Ramsar Management System¹⁰³ (RMS) reference number so that a cross reference with the RMS is possible, and to facilitate reporting. However, five of the annual action plans provided had not assigned RMS reference numbers to the listed actions.

As noted above, the monitoring of site management plan implementation is enabled by the RMS. If RMS reference numbers are not assigned to management actions, then the RMS cannot be readily used to monitor implementation. This limits the ability of DELWP and CMAs to ensure that priority actions are being undertaken to maintain or improve the ecological character of Ramsar sites.

¹⁰¹ Funding for Ramsar sites will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

¹⁰² Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 8.

¹⁰³ The Ramsar Management System is an online system that enables DELWP to track the implementation of Ramsar site management plans and monitor ecological character.

FINDING 10: All 12 site coordinating committees have developed annual action plans for their Ramsar sites, in collaboration with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Most annual action plans contained the information required by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. However, the activities in the plans need to be aligned with management actions and critical components, processes, and services. In addition, the use of Ramsar Management System reference numbers needs to be improved to ensure the annual action plans can guide the implementation of site management plans.

Risks and issues register

The risk and issues register in the annual action plan allows the site coordination committee to identify any risks to the implementation of activities for the financial year and outline their mitigation strategies. The Committee found this section was poorly implemented by site coordinating committees. The risk registers developed did not comply with the Victorian Government's Risk Management Framework.¹⁰⁴ Considering and addressing risk is an integral part of management and, if not implemented effectively, has the potential to negatively impact on the long-term outcomes achieved for Ramsar sites.

Six of the site coordination committees have not completed a risk register. However, for those site coordination committees that did, there were range of shortcomings in the risk register presented. These included:

- risks that were poorly defined
- risks that did not identify which activity they related to
- responsibility was not assigned for risks
- risk mitigation strategies that lacked detail.

The activities listed in annual action plans are expected to directly align with the outcome of maintaining or improving the ecological character of the Ramsar sites.¹⁰⁵ If risks to the implementation of these actions are not effectively mitigated, this will have a negative impact on the ecological character of the Ramsar sites. The Committee was unable to determine how the risk registers and the risks identified in them informed the prioritisation of activities in the annual action plans.

FINDING 11: Half of the annual action plans developed for Victorian Ramsar sites do not contain a risk register. Risks registers are regarded by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning as an integral component of a Ramsar site's annual action plan. The risk registers that have been developed do not comply with the Victorian Government Risk Management Framework.

¹⁰⁴ Department of Treasury and Finance, *Victorian Government Risk Management Framework*, Department of Treasury and Finance, Melbourne, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 8.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning work with Ramsar site coordinating committees to ensure that annual action plans:

- a. link activities to management actions and critical components, processes, and services and
- b. contain appropriate risk registers that comply with the Victorian Government's Risk Management Framework.

BOX 3.1: Better practice annual action plan—Gippsland Lakes

The 2019–20 annual action plan for the Gippsland Lakes Wetlands Ramsar site is an example of a well-developed, clear and detailed plan. The plan encompasses a prioritisation process, activity table, activity location map and a risks and issues register. It also includes a program development document, which sets out the principles and process for prioritising, assessing and accounting for the allocation of funds and the delivery of projects.

Each activity listed in the plan aligns with a relevant management action and critical CPS. This enables the site coordination committee to demonstrate the alignment of these elements with the outcome of maintaining or improving the ecological character of the site.

The document outlines that the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site receives investment from several sources to implement a wide array of projects. The projects directly related to Ramsar values and those which address environmental issues and the health of the lakes system more broadly. The annual action plan is informed by a broader prioritisation process to select individual projects and programs for implementation in the period 2017–2020. Furthermore, there are four program logic diagrams that explain the contribution of programs to the broader outcomes for key areas across the site. These four programs are:

- Improving the wetlands of Jones Bay and Lake King
- Enhancing connectivity and condition of Lake Wellington
- Protecting Traditional Owner country of the Gippsland Lakes outer barrier
- Understand and improving aquatic habitats and ecosystems.

Activities outlined in the action plan are clearly classified in terms of output, relevant management action, timeframe, cost, funding source and responsible agency. The activity table offers a concise and effective framework for managing the implementation of activities and programs.

The risks and issues highlighted in the action plan offer effective descriptions of risk, the likelihood of their occurrence, potential consequences, level of risk and respective mitigation strategies. The mitigation strategies outlined in the action plan offer better practice examples of how to minimise and respond to possible risks.

3.3.2 Effectiveness of annual action plans

The annual action plans for 2019–20 that were provided to the Committee were the first set of annual action plans developed. The first round of reporting against the annual action plans is due in September 2020.¹⁰⁶ As the implementation of the plans, and subsequent reporting process is incomplete, the Committee was unable to provide an assessment of the effectiveness of the annual action plans in strengthening the management of Victorian Ramsar sites.

FINDING 12: The first round of reporting against annual action plans will not occur until September 2020. As a result, it is too early in the implementation of the annual action planning process to determine its effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the first round of annual action plans in managing Ramsar sites, to inform future annual action plans.

3.4 Managing ecological character

Under the Ramsar Convention, contracting parties are expected to promote the conservation of Ramsar wetlands, and ensure the wise use of them. Wise use is defined in the Ramsar Convention as:

... the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development.¹⁰⁷

In addition, contracting parties should inform the Ramsar Secretariat of any changes that occur to a site's ecological character as a result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference. Failure to maintain the ecological character of Ramsar sites or inform the Secretariat of any changes risks breaching a contracting party's international obligations under the Ramsar Convention.

Under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth), DELWP is required to advise the Commonwealth Government as soon as it becomes aware of potential or actual changes. VAGO found that there was limited evidence that Victoria's Ramsar sites were being protected from decline, while there was evidence of potential change in the character of some sites.¹⁰⁸ At the time of the audit, DELWP had not reported a change in the ecological character of Ramsar wetlands since the sites were

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰⁷ *Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, signed 2 February 1971, UNTS 996 (entered into force 21 December 1975), Res IX.1 Annex A.

¹⁰⁸ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. x.

listed, although DELWP advised VAGO that it would be reporting a potential change to the Commonwealth following a review of Ramsar sites that took place in 2014–15.¹⁰⁹

To assess how DELWP was managing the ecological character of Ramsar sites, the Committee considered evidence presented to it through public hearings and submissions to the inquiry, as well as publicly available key Ramsar documents. The Committee also investigated recent developments and changes to two Ramsar sites that were brought to its attention during the inquiry.

3.4.1 Ecological Character Descriptions

An ECD is one of the main tools that enables contracting parties to meet their obligations to manage their Ramsar sites in a way that maintains their ecological character.¹¹⁰ ECDs are documents that should be prepared by site managers at the time of a wetland's listing as a Ramsar site.¹¹¹ The ECD establishes quantitative benchmarks that allow changes to the wetland's ecological character to be assessed. The development of ECDs is a key indicator under Target 1 of the *Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016–2024*.¹¹²

The development of ECDs is guided by a framework created by the Commonwealth Department of the Environment. The framework lists the minimum elements that an ECD should contain. These include:

- site details
- a description of the components, processes, benefits and services of the site
- limits of acceptable change
- potential threats to the site
- knowledge gaps and key monitoring needs.¹¹³

VAGO found that in 2016, of the 11 Ramsar sites in Victoria, 10 had a published ECD. The final ECDs were developed between 2010 and 2012, although nine of the wetlands were originally listed in 1982 and one in 2001. VAGO also found that the ECD for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site had been in draft form since 2011, as it had not been endorsed by the Commonwealth.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. xv.

¹¹⁰ *Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, signed 2 February 1971, UNTS 996 (entered into force 21 December 1975), art 3(2).

¹¹¹ Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *National Framework and Guidance for Describing the Ecological Character of Australia's Ramsar Wetlands*, Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, Canberra, 2008, p. 10.

¹¹² Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016–2024*, Ramsar Convention Secretariat, Gland, 2016, p. 22.

¹¹³ Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *National Framework and Guidance for Describing the Ecological Character of Australia's Ramsar Wetlands*, pp. 11–2.

¹¹⁴ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 13.

In its submission to the Committee on 2 December 2019, DELWP advised that the ECD for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site was still in draft form and had been submitted to the Commonwealth Department of the Environment for review.¹¹⁵

The Commonwealth Department of the Environment later advised the Committee that the Commonwealth Government provided final comment on the ECD on 23 January 2020. Once finalised, DELWP will need to resubmit the ECD to Australia's Ramsar Administrative Authority for endorsement, after which the ECD will then be published on the Commonwealth Department of the Environment's website. Delays in the publication of the ECD have primarily been due to discussions in relation to the datasets that have been used in the ECD. Victorian officials have since updated these datasets to include information up to 2018.¹¹⁶

FINDING 13: The Ecological Character Descriptions for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site has not been published, although it has been in draft form since 2011. As a result, there is limited established baseline data available to monitor and assess change in the site's ecological character.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in collaboration with Melbourne Water ensure that the Ecological Character Descriptions for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site are finalised and published as soon as possible.

3.4.2 Change in ecological character—Lake Wellington, Gippsland Lakes

Lake Wellington is a large, shallow body of water within the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site. In the ECD for the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site, Lake Wellington is classified as a permanent open freshwater wetland under the Victorian Wetland Classification System. This is interpreted as a coastal brackish or saline lagoon under the Ramsar wetland type classification.¹¹⁷ The lake is characterised by highly disturbed and suspended sediment and while predominantly fresh, undergoes episodic saline intrusion that has affected its aquatic vegetation and fringing wetland communities.¹¹⁸ As a coastal brackish or saline lagoon, Lake Wellington is considered a critical component of the ecological character of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar Site.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 12.

¹¹⁶ Janine Cullen, Director, Wetlands Section, Department of Environment and Energy, correspondence, 22 January 2020.

¹¹⁷ Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Gippsland Lakes Ramsar Site Ecological Character Description*, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Canberra, 2011, p. 18.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

In 2009 a third party raised concerns with the international Ramsar secretariat about increasing salinity in Lake Wellington. The Commonwealth Government undertook an assessment of ecological character change. In February 2012 the Commonwealth determined that the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site had not undergone human-induced adverse alteration in its critical components, processes and benefits or services since the time it was listed in 1982.¹²⁰

At the time of the assessment, a LAC had not been set for salinity in Lake Wellington. However, following the publication of the ECD for the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site in 2011, a LAC was determined that applied to Lake Wellington, which is outlined in Table 3.3. The LAC did not clearly address salinity.

Table 3.3 Limits of acceptable change for wetland habitats in Gippsland Lakes

Critical Component	Indicator for Critical Component	Limits of acceptable change
Wetland habitats	Coastal brackish or saline lagoons (for example, Lake King, Lake Victoria, Lake Wellington, Lake Tyers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No change in wetland typology from the 1980 classification.^a A long-term change in ecosystem state at Lake King, Lake Victoria or Lake Tyers from relatively clear, seagrass dominated estuarine lagoons to turbid, algae dominated system (characteristic of Lake Wellington) will represent a change in ecological character No single cyanobacteria algal bloom event will cover greater than 10% of the combined area of coastal brackish/saline lagoons (that is, Lake King, Victoria, Wellington and Tyers) in two successive years.

a. Under the 1980 classification, Lake Wellington is considered a permanent open freshwater wetland.

Source: Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Gippsland Lakes Ramsar Site Ecological Character Description*, prepared by BMT WBM Pty Ltd, Canberra, 2011, p.119.

DELWP had advised VAGO that, following a second notification of increased salinity from a third party in 2015–16, it was reviewing the ECD for the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site. DELWP is developing a draft addendum to include a new LAC for salinity at Lake Wellington, and it intends to reassess the site against this LAC.¹²¹ The findings will be included in the addendum. However, the addendum has not yet been released.

In August 2017 the Victorian Government advised the Commonwealth of a potential change in ecological character due to increasing salinity.¹²² At the hearing on 2 December 2019 DELWP advised the Committee that the Gippsland Lakes faced a potential change in ecological character, with monitoring data revealing increasing levels of salinity in Lake Wellington. The increased salinity was attributed to sea level rise, reduced freshwater inflows and climate change.¹²³

¹²⁰ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 14.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Department of the Environment and Energy, *Australia's Ramsar Implementation Plan 2016–2018 Implementation Plan for First Triennium of Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016–2024*, Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra, 2019, p. 10.

¹²³ Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Gippsland Lakes Ramsar Site Ecological Character Description*, p. 10.

In its submission to the inquiry, the Sale Field and Game Association raised their concerns around the increasing levels of salinity in Lake Wellington.¹²⁴ This rise was considered as meeting the criteria set out in the National Guidance on *Notifying Change in Ecological Character of Australian Ramsar Wetlands*, whereby a formal notification of change to ecological character was required.¹²⁵ Appearing before the Committee on 4 December 2019, Mr Peter Warner, Conservation Officer, Sale Field and Game Association, attributed the rise in salinity to a deepening of the Lakes Entrance channel.¹²⁶

Further concerns around the levels of salinity in Lake Wellington and its impact on nearby Dowd Morass were raised by Mr Gary Howard, Project Manager, Heart Morass rehabilitation project, Wetlands Environmental Taskforce. Mr Howard advised the Committee:

... the biggest issue that I see with the Ramsar sites and the Gippsland Lakes is a lack of action. I go to that many meetings and I get involved in that many focus groups with catchment management and various other departments, and it seems to be all about reports and consultants and nothing ever happens on the ground. In the most recent one—and Peter can probably add to this—the Sale branch wrote to the then Minister for Water relevant to a very severe salt ingress to Dowd Morass. To that end we ended up with another lot of consultants working through catchment management, and I think the end of the report was, ‘Let’s do nothing and sit back and watch and see what happens’. It is beyond that now.¹²⁷

The issue of increasing salinity in the Ramsar site was raised throughout the inquiry by a number of other parties. Environmental Justice Australia stated that extended marine influence and salinisation of the estuarine lakes system was compromising the ecological character of the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site.¹²⁸ Mr Peter Reefman, President of the East Gippsland Landcare Network advised the Committee that salinity was rising in the Gippsland Lakes, and that it had led to a significant fish kill at the entrance to Lake Wellington.¹²⁹

Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, confirmed that a formal assessment was being prepared to determine if a change in ecological character had occurred.¹³⁰ This is being led by

¹²⁴ Sale Field and Game Association, *Submission 372*, p. 2.

¹²⁵ Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *National Guidelines for Notifying Change in Ecological Character of Australian Ramsar Sites (Article 3.2): Module 3 of the National Guidelines for Ramsar Wetlands - Implementing the Ramsar Convention in Australia*, Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, Canberra, 2009.

¹²⁶ Mr Peter Warner, Conservation Officer, Sale Field and Game Association, Public hearing, Sale, 4 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

¹²⁷ Mr Gary Howard, Project Manager, Heart Morass rehabilitation project, Wetlands Environmental Taskforce, Public hearing, Sale, 4 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

¹²⁸ Environmental Justice Australia, *Submission*, Attachment 306, p. 6.

¹²⁹ Mr Peter Reefman, President, East Gippsland Landcare Network, Landcare Victoria, Public hearing, Sale, 4 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

¹³⁰ Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, Public hearing, Sale, 4 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

DELWP in collaboration with the Commonwealth Department of the Environment.¹³¹ However, no reporting date has been finalised for this assessment.

The Committee notes the length of the timeframes involved between concerns being raised about the Gippsland Lakes, and the commencement of the formal assessment.

3.4.3 Change in ecological character—Barmah Forest

Barmah Forest is part of the largest complex of tree-dominated floodplain wetlands in southern Australia and covers 28,515 hectares. Together with Millewa Forest it forms the largest continuous stand of river red gum forest in Australia.¹³² In the site's ECD, it is classified as a freshwater marsh (river red gum) under the Victorian Wetland Classification System, which is interpreted as a freshwater, tree-dominated wetland under the Ramsar wetland type classification.¹³³

A critical component of the wetland is its support of the regionally significant Moira grass (*Pseudoraphis spinescens*) community. The site is bioregionally significant with respect to Moira grass, containing the most extensive expanses of this species in the Murray-Darling Basin.

A LAC has been set for Moira grass in Barmah Forest, which requires that the extent of Moira grass should not be less than 1,350 hectares, or 4.7% of the site's total area. In the 2011 ECD for the site it is stated that there had not been a recent quantitative assessment of the extent of Moira grass in 2011 but that it was possible that the LAC had been exceeded.¹³⁴

In 2017, the Victorian Government advised the Commonwealth of a potential change in Barmah Forest's ecological character due to a decline in the extent of Moira grass. The Commonwealth Government stated in its report against indicators in Australia's Ramsar Implementation Plan that a formal assessment was being prepared.¹³⁵

Dr Amber Clarke, Director, Waterways Programs, DELWP, informed the Committee that DELWP had information that indicated a potential change in ecological character for Barmah Forest. This was related to a decline in the extent of Moira grass at the site.¹³⁶

In its submission to the inquiry, the Victorian National Parks Association highlighted its concerns with the Barmah Forest Ramsar site. The submission stated that the site was in a critical state of decline, and the Moira grass present had declined to an area of less than 900 hectares.¹³⁷ Evidence provided to the Committee by Dr Mark Norman,

¹³¹ Mr Mark Taylor, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 42–3.

¹³² Environment Department of Sustainability, Water, Population and Communities, *Barmah Forest Ramsar Site Ecological Character Description*, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Canberra, 2011, p. vii.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹³⁵ Department of the Environment and Energy, *Australia's Ramsar Implementation Plan 2016–2018 Report against Indicators*, Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra, 2019, pp. 10–1.

¹³⁶ Dr Amber Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹³⁷ Victorian National Parks Association, *Submission 402*, p. 6.

Chief Conservation Scientist, Parks Victoria, confirmed a decline in the extent of Moira grass in Barmah forest from 4,000 hectares in the 1930s to 182 hectares recently.¹³⁸

A four-year Strategic Action Plan for Barmah Forest was released in 2020, following a consultation period. The plan states that the LAC has clearly been far exceeded with a loss of 88% of the Moira grass extent since listing.¹³⁹

Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director, Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns, DELWP, advised the Committee of a program of fencing at little Rushy Swamp in the Barmah Forest. This saw 15 hectares fenced to exclude invasive species, which resulted in the re-establishment of Moira grass in this area.¹⁴⁰ The annual action plan for Barmah Forest contained seven activities that directly targeted Moira grass. Of these, four activities were research-based, one was a monitoring program, and two were works programs to establish 20 hectares of fencing. The Committee was not presented with evidence of any further actions to reduce the decline of Moira grass.



Black Winged Stilt. Photo Credit: Sean Phillipson, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority.

¹³⁸ Dr Mark Norman, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

¹³⁹ Parks Victoria, *Strategic Action Plan: Protection of Floodplain Marshes in Barmah National Park and Barmah Forest Ramsar Site*, Parks Victoria, Melbourne, 2020, p. 16.

¹⁴⁰ Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

4 Ramsar site funding

4.1 Summary

A key challenge for the effective management of Ramsar sites is ensuring appropriate funding can be obtained.¹⁴¹ Appropriate financing and resourcing of Ramsar sites is a priority area of focus in the Fourth Strategic Plan for the Ramsar Convention. The plan states that effective mobilization of additional resources for wetland conservation and wise use is required at local, national, regional and global levels.¹⁴²

In the 2016 audit of Ramsar site management, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) found that inadequate ongoing resourcing arrangements were a major hurdle to the effective management of Ramsar sites in Victoria. Not all management plan actions were funded and responsible agencies relied on grants from both the state and Commonwealth. The different funding streams resulted in competing priorities from the state and the Commonwealth that site managers had difficulty meeting.¹⁴³

The Auditor-General recommended:

1. that the Department of Environment Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), in conjunction with Parks Victoria and Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs):
 - b. strengthen management plans to include time frames and resourcing to ensure that actions are carried out effectively and in a timely way.
2. That DELWP:
 - b. work with CMAs and site managers to develop and assess options for the direct funding of management plan activities focused on high priority threats that impact on the ecological character of Ramsar sites.¹⁴⁴

To determine whether DELWP had implemented VAGO's recommendations, the Committee examined evidence from public hearings and submissions, as well as the annual action plans for Victoria's 12 Ramsar sites. The Committee also considered whether VAGO's findings on the ongoing resourcing arrangements for Ramsar sites had been addressed.

¹⁴¹ Daniela Russi, et al., *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity for Water and Wetlands*, Ramsar Secretariat, Gland, 2013, p. 38.

¹⁴² Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016–2024*, Ramsar Convention Secretariat, Gland, 2015, p. 7.

¹⁴³ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands: Victorian Auditor-General's Report 2016 17:3*, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Melbourne, 2016, p. xiii.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

Since 2016 DELWP has provided \$5.235 million in funding to CMAs over four years to undertake implementation, coordination, monitoring and MERI activities for Ramsar sites. This was in addition to existing funding for environmental water delivery, funding to improve waterway and catchment health, and fish stocking, which provide some benefit to Ramsar sites.¹⁴⁵ DELWP has strengthened management plans by developing annual action plans for Ramsar sites. The annual action plans facilitate the prioritisation of management plan activities by outlining their estimated costs and resourcing.

It is still difficult to determine the amount of direct funding that is available for Ramsar sites. A large amount of funding available is fixed term or in the form of one-off payments. Parks Victoria was reliant on fixed term funding or one-off payments for 70% of its Ramsar site management resourcing for the period 2016–20. This hampers long-term planning by CMAs and site managers and the implementation of activities to manage changes to the ecological character of Ramsar sites.

4.2 Funding for Ramsar sites

VAGO found that inadequate ongoing resourcing arrangements were a major hurdle to the effective management of Ramsar sites in Victoria. At the time of the audit there was no dedicated funding for the management of Ramsar sites, although DELWP provided CMAs with some funding for Ramsar site planning and on-ground management through its Waterway Health Program.¹⁴⁶ The Commonwealth also provided funding for Ramsar sites through several programs. VAGO found that this funding was not ongoing and led to challenges managing competing state and Commonwealth priorities.¹⁴⁷

DELWP has provided \$5.235 million to CMAs over four years to undertake implementation, coordination, and monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) activities until 2019–20. This is in addition to existing funding for environmental water delivery, funding to improve waterway and catchment health, and fish stocking, which has some benefit for Ramsar sites.¹⁴⁸ However the management and monitoring of Victoria's Ramsar sites remains heavily reliant on grants and fixed term funding sources. This makes it difficult to determine the total quantum of resources available and undertake long-term planning and management.

4.2.1 Delivery of additional funding

In 2018 DELWP advised VAGO of the steps that it had taken to address the recommendation that the department develop and assess options for the direct funding of management plan activities. In its response, DELWP informed VAGO that funding from all sources was considered by the site coordinating committees when planning annual implementation activities at each site. DELWP stated that the Committees'

¹⁴⁵ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, pp. 21–2.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁸ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 2.

approaches to targeting high priority threats with available funding were set out in their Terms of Reference. DELWP did not specify a completion date for its action and did not outline a recurrent funding source for Ramsar site management activities.¹⁴⁹

VAGO advised the Committee that DELWP's response was not clear about what options for direct funding of management plan activities it had developed and assessed.¹⁵⁰

In its submission to the inquiry, DELWP outlined the funding that had been provided to CMAs for the period 2016–20, totalling \$5.235 million. The funding was provided to enable CMAs to undertake implementation, coordination, monitoring and MERI activities. It was intended to complement \$222 million in existing waterway funding that, in addition to funding environmental water delivery, improving waterway and catchment health, and fish stocking, provides some benefit for Ramsar sites.¹⁵¹

Table 4.1 Funding provided to Catchment Management Authorities by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, 2016–20

Year	Implementation	Coordination	Site monitoring	MERI and planning
2016–17	\$387,000	-	-	-
2017–18	\$2,000,000	\$209,000	\$343,000	\$140,000
2018–19	\$278,000	\$286,000	\$686,000	-
2019–20	\$300,000	\$286,000	\$329,000	-
Total	\$2,956,000	\$781,000	\$1,358,000	\$140,000

Source: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p.10.

DELWP stated that the \$5.235 million was used to complete actions for each of the VAGO recommendations and to increase on-ground management actions at Ramsar sites, with responses to the audit recommendations completed between 2016 and 2018.¹⁵² The majority of the funding for implementation was \$2 million delivered in 2017–18, which dropped to \$278,000 in 2018–19.

However, the Committee was unable to determine whether DELWP has taken steps to ensure that the quantum of funding provided from 2016–20 will be made available beyond this period to ensure that:

- MERI plans can be implemented
- the management actions and activities identified in annual action plans can be completed.

¹⁴⁹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Submission 21*, p. 13.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁵¹ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Due to the lack of recurrent funding there is uncertainty around the resources that will be available for site coordinators and site managers to continue to implement management actions and activities identified as part of the ongoing annual planning process.

The Committee asked DELWP whether the investment by the Government was grant specific funding, or if it had led to an increase in recurrent funding for Ramsar sites. Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director, Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns, DELWP, advised that:

From the period of 2016 to 2020 there has been a \$5.235 million Victorian Government investment in Ramsar-specific funding, and that is really covering...monitoring ecological character and management effectiveness, supporting coordination between the agencies and implementing site management plans.

The work in Ramsar though is not necessarily just specific to these kinds of grant fundings for coordination and monitoring type activity. There is also the broader investment in catchment and waterway health. As Dr Clarke was saying, investment upstream affects what happens downstream in our wetlands, so our catchment management authorities have been drawing on the \$222 million four-year investment in catchment and waterway health. That combines again with funding from other sources such as the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Government have two major program streams that assist Ramsar sites. The 2013 to 2018 program was the national Landcare partnership, and then it has been reconfigured for the period of 2018 to 2023 into a regional Landcare program.¹⁵³

In their submission to the inquiry, DELWP outlined the sources of funding to monitor and manage Ramsar sites:

- Victorian Government funds from catchment and waterway health programs and biodiversity response planning
- Commonwealth funds from the Regional Land Partnerships Program (formerly the National Landcare Programme)
- joint program funding from the Murray Darling Basin Authority for the Living Murray Icon sites
- \$12.5 million for management of Gippsland Lakes over five years (2015–16 to 2019–20)
- Parks Victoria funding for land management
- Melbourne Water waterway management funds, and
- funding from Water Corporations.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

¹⁵⁴ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 9.

However, these funding sources are not uniformly accessible for the management of Victorian Ramsar sites. For example, the Living Murray Program only provides funding for the Barmah Forest, Gunbower Forest, and Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes Ramsar sites.¹⁵⁵

The Auditor-General made recommendations on the resourcing of management plans (1b) and direct funding of management plan activities (2b).

FINDING 14: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning allocated \$5.235 million to Catchment Management Authorities to undertake implementation, coordination of annual action plans and monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement plans until 2019–20. However recurrent funding has not been allocated beyond 2019–20.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning explore options to establish funding arrangements to ensure that Ramsar site monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement plans can be implemented and the management actions and activities identified in annual action plans can be sustained.

4.2.2 Reliance on grants and fixed term funding

VAGO found that not all actions in Ramsar sites' management plans were funded, which led responsible agencies to rely on grants and fixed-term funding sources.¹⁵⁶ However, there are risks associated with relying on this form of funding. Notably, that funded projects may only be short term, and as a result funds may not be spent on long-term monitoring or maintaining ecological character.

An example of the risks associated with Ramsar sites' reliance on grants and fixed term funding sources is provided by the Regional Land Partnerships Program. As noted above, this was listed by DELWP as a potential source of funding for Ramsar site management in their submission to the inquiry. However, funding under the Regional Land Partnerships Program was announced in July 2018 and only five Victoria Ramsar sites received funding: Barmah Forest, Corner Inlet, Gippsland Lakes, Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes and Western Port.¹⁵⁷ Two of these sites were already receiving funds through the Living Murray Program and Gippsland Lakes received \$12.5 million in funding from the Victoria Government from 2015–16 to 2019–20. An additional funding round for the Regional Land Partnerships Program has not been announced.

This discrepancy in funding highlights the risks associated with Ramsar sites relying on grant funding and its effect on long-term management. Some sites may be more successful in funding bids than others and better able to implement priority management actions and activities. This will lead to disparate outcomes for Ramsar sites across the state.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 21.

¹⁵⁷ National Landcare Program, *Regional Land Partnerships - Project Listing*, 2018, <<http://www.nrm.gov.au/publications/regional-land-partnerships-project-listing>> accessed 26/03/2020.

In considering the use of grants and fixed-term funding for Ramsar site management, the Committee asked Parks Victoria for a breakdown of its recurrent funding for Ramsar site management against funding that was contingent on tied payments. Parks Victoria provided a summary of all funding spent or planned by Parks Victoria between 2016–2020 for the 11 Ramsar sites where Parks Victoria is the site manager, totalling \$6,442,169. The funding was divided into two categories, recurrent funding and tied funding.

Parks Victoria advised that recurrent funding is internal funding that is used for base labour costs and includes time spent conducting on-ground works and supporting activities such as participation in the site coordinating committee representing Parks Victoria. Recurrent funding also includes operating costs contributing to on-ground actions.¹⁵⁸ Tied funding is composed of external project funds sourced via funding bids that is received directly by Parks Victoria or via contract with CMAs. It is used to deliver contracted activities such as on-ground works and monitoring.¹⁵⁹

The information provided by Parks Victoria is contained in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Expenditure by Parks Victoria at Ramsar sites, 2016–20

Ramsar site	Recurrent funding	Tied funding
Barmah Forest	\$355,055	\$491,852
Corner Inlet	\$265,000	\$30,000
Gippsland Lakes	\$88,000	\$1,764,997
Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay	\$48,000	-
Gunbower Forest	\$28,165	-
Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes	\$498,198	\$754,932
Kerang Wetlands	\$64,165	\$109,820
Lake Albacutya	\$36,378	\$310,329
Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula	\$75,000	\$736,078
Western District Lakes	-	\$64,000
Western Port	\$139,000	\$555,200
Cross-site	\$28,000	-
Total	\$1,624,961	\$4,817,208

Source: Parks Victoria, Inquiry into Auditor-General's Report No. 202: *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands* (2016) hearing, response to questions on notice received 13 December 2019, p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ Parks Victoria, Inquiry into Auditor-General's Report No. 202: *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands* (2016) hearing, response to questions on notice received 13 December 2019, p. 1.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

More than 70% of the funding spent on Ramsar sites by Parks Victoria for the 2016–20 period was tied funding. Two Ramsar sites did not receive any funding beyond the recurrent funding that was allocated to them. As noted above, tied funding is used predominantly by Parks Victoria to undertake monitoring.

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) noted that although Parks Victoria receive some funding from CMAs to manage specific threats, they require secure funding for ecological management programs. The VNPA recommended that Parks Victoria be funded directly for ecological works to enhance ecological character.¹⁶⁰

In their submission to the inquiry, the East Gippsland Shire Council stated that while grant funding was available, a reliance on limited and short-term grant funding had a negative impact on:

- long-term strategic and action planning
- effectiveness of programs and projects
- resources through administrative burden
- measurement of outcomes, with grants steering towards measuring outputs.¹⁶¹

This also reflects concerns raised by Professor Max Finlayson, Wetland Ecologist, Charles Sturt University, about an overreliance on grants and fixed-term funding sources to manage Victorian Ramsar sites. In his submission, Professor Finlayson stated that direct systematic government funding for management plans of Ramsar wetlands was required to ensure their health is not subject to annual budget funding bids.¹⁶²

The Auditor-General made recommendations on the resourcing of management plans (1b) and direct funding of management plan activities (2b).

FINDING 15: Management of Victoria’s Ramsar sites relies heavily on grants and fixed-term funding sources. A lack of funding certainty can impact on site managers and coordinators’ capacity to undertake monitoring activities and effectively manage the ecological character of Ramsar sites over the long-term.

RECOMMENDATION 9: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in collaboration with Parks Victoria explore options to establish funding arrangements to ensure that long-term Ramsar site management and monitoring programs can be maintained.

¹⁶⁰ Victorian National Parks Association, *Submission 402*, p. 6.

¹⁶¹ East Gippsland Shire Council, *Submission 454*, p. 2.

¹⁶² Professor Max Finlayson, *Submission 456*, p. 5.

4.3 Funding allocations in annual action plans

As outlined in Chapter 3, to address VAGO's recommendation that it strengthen management plans to include time frames and resourcing, DELWP committed to developing a framework for management plan implementation. This included the development and implementation of annual action plans as a key component.¹⁶³ The annual action plans set out the immediate and short-term actions required to implement the Ramsar site management plan during the following financial year. In particular, the annual action plans assist site coordinating committees in determining their resourcing requirements, and prioritising funding to activities.¹⁶⁴

In response to a follow-up VAGO survey in 2018 DELWP stated that it had addressed the recommendation that it strengthen management plans, including through its implementation of the annual planning process. As a part of this process DELWP advised that site coordinating committees considered all available sources of funding to ensure the appropriate alignment of funding during their planning.¹⁶⁵ DELWP reviews all annual action plans.¹⁶⁶

The annual action plans developed for Ramsar sites facilitate the prioritisation of management plan activities, by outlining their estimated costs and how much funding can be allocated to priority actions.¹⁶⁷ However, a third of activities have not been costed, which limits the ability of authorities to effectively plan for site management.

4.3.1 Analysis of annual action plans

In addition to the analysis outlined in Chapter 3, the Committee considered how funding was addressed in the annual action plans provided by CMAs. This included the levels of funding that were estimated for each activity that was identified in the annual action plans, as well as the sources identified for this funding.

The number of activities listed in individual action plans varied. In a similar manner, the estimated costs of fully implementing the activities also varied considerably. The total number of costed and uncostered activities listed against each site, along with the total costs estimated by the CMAs, are outlined in Table 4.3.

¹⁶³ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 7.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁵ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Submission 21*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁶ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁷ Dr Amber Clarke, Director Waterways Programs, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

Table 4.3 Activities listed in annual actions plans and estimated costs for 2019–20

Ramsar site	Number of costed activities	Number of uncosted activities	Estimated cost of costed activities
Barmah Forest	28	18	\$972,795
Corner Inlet	11	6	\$1,211,000
Edithvale-Seafood Wetlands	7	7	\$149,500
Gippsland Lakes	37	15	\$6,995,000
Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay	19	9	\$768,250
Gunbower Forest	6	5	\$152,000
Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes	49	2	\$2,130,000
Kerang Wetlands	9	4	\$182,000
Lake Albacutya	4	0	\$70,000
Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula	21	37	\$737,500
Western District Lakes	18	4	\$451,500
Western Port	9	28	\$750,002
Total	218	135	\$14,569,547

Source: Unpublished annual action plans for Victorian Ramsar sites, supplied by CMAs.

Determining the costs associated with undertaking activities is critical to ensure that planning and resource allocation can be effectively undertaken. The total estimated cost for implementing all costed activities in the annual action plans was \$14.5 million. Comparatively, VAGO found that the total estimated cost of managing Victoria's Ramsar sites was \$15.2 million in 2014–15 and \$11 million in 2015–16.¹⁶⁸

However, a third of the activities listed in the annual action plans for 2019–20 were uncosted, and uncosted activities were present in all but one annual action plan. In the case of the annual action plan for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site, more than two thirds of the 58 activities listed in the plan were uncosted.

The Auditor-General made recommendations on the resourcing of management plans (1b) and direct funding of management plan activities (2b).

FINDING 16: Thirty eight per cent of the activities listed in the 2019–20 annual action plans for Ramsar sites are not costed. As a result, site managers and coordination committees cannot effectively determine the total cost of managing their Ramsar sites, or effectively prioritise activities identified in the annual action plans.

¹⁶⁸ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 23.

RECOMMENDATION 10: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning work with site coordinating committees and Catchment Management Authorities to ensure that all activities listed in Ramsar sites' annual action plans for 2020–21 are costed.

4.4 Establishing resourcing requirements for Ramsar sites

A key finding of VAGO's audit was that Parks Victoria was unable to assess its 10 Ramsar sites and know what resources it requires to manage them. At the time of the audit, Parks Victoria advised VAGO that it was planning to collect this information as it introduced its new planning process.¹⁶⁹

There is still limited visibility of the resources that are required to effectively manage Ramsar sites annually. Entities responsible for site management are unable to determine the resources required to effectively manage Ramsar sites on a year to year basis, due to ongoing variations in costs and resourcing levels. Melbourne Water remains an exception to this, however it holds a unique position amongst Ramsar site managers and coordinators.

4.4.1 Annual resourcing requirements for Ramsar sites

VAGO found that, as environmental management is part of Parks Victoria's core service, it should be able to assess and know what resources it requires to manage its Ramsar sites, but it could not do so.¹⁷⁰ In its submission to the inquiry, VAGO recommended that the Committee ask Parks Victoria to outline the work undertaken to determine its Ramsar site resourcing requirements as it implemented its new planning process.

Reflecting this advice, a line of questioning pursued by the Committee focused on the ability of relevant authorities, including Parks Victoria, to effectively determine the resourcing requirements for the Ramsar sites they oversaw.

The Committee asked Parks Victoria whether it had access to information that would allow it to determine its Ramsar site resourcing requirements. Dr Mark Norman, Chief Conservation Scientist, Parks Victoria, informed the Committee:

It is very difficult to put an exact figure on systems that are so variable time wise. The cost of fixing a site is something we cannot put a rigid price on. What we do do is we set the priorities and then we seek as much funding as possible to meet those objectives.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁷¹ Dr Mark Norman, Chief Conservation Scientist, Parks Victoria, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

Dr Amber Clarke, Director, Waterways Programs, DELWP, informed the Committee that DELWP was unable to break down, by site, a specific figure that would represent the overall cost for managing Ramsar sites. The reason for this was put down to the wide range of activities required, as well as the different funding sources that needed to be accessed.¹⁷²

Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director, Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns, DELWP, also advised that it would be difficult to define the budgets on a per-wetland basis. Ms Lau used the example of managing environmental watering through the northern Victoria system, stating:

... that might include deliveries from jointly managed environmental water across jurisdictions, through the Living Murray program, Commonwealth environmental water holdings and Victorian environmental water holdings. The way in which they will flow is that they will be released from storage, they might flow through Barmah, then through Gunbower, along the River Murray, be pumped out to Hattah and some of it returns to the river and waters the Lower Lakes Ramsar site in South Australia. So the budget configuration is very difficult to attribute site by site, because investment is often targeted at multiple geographic areas, but to achieve benefit at the Ramsar site.¹⁷³



Heart Morass Wetland. Photo Credit: Sean Phillipson, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority.

¹⁷² Dr Amber Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

¹⁷³ Ms Karen Lau, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

The Auditor-General made recommendations on the resourcing of management plans (1b) and direct funding of management plan activities (2b).

FINDING 17: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Parks Victoria remain unable to effectively quantify the resources they require to manage Victoria's Ramsar sites. This limits the ability of these entities to plan and allocate funding on a year-to-year basis to ensure the effective management of Victoria's Ramsar sites.

RECOMMENDATION 11: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Parks Victoria calculate the ongoing annual costs of managing Victoria's Ramsar sites, to better inform future management of the sites.

Melbourne Water is the site manager and site coordinator for Edithvale Seaford Wetlands, as well as the site Manager for the Western Treatment Plant portion of the Port Phillip Bay and Bellarine Peninsula site.¹⁷⁴ Owing to the unique position it holds, Melbourne Water is better able to quantify the resources it requires.

Dr Nerina Di Lorenzo, Executive General Manager, Service Delivery, Melbourne Water, was able to advise the Committee that Melbourne Water spent an average of \$1.66 million each year across the two Ramsar sites it manages. The funding profile was built up as a result of action plans that Melbourne Water had developed for these sites over the past five years.¹⁷⁵

The funding that Melbourne Water uses for the management activities it undertakes in these sites is recurrent funding drawn from the waterways and drainage rates collected by the organisation.¹⁷⁶

FINDING 18: Melbourne Water effectively quantifies the resources it requires to manage its Ramsar sites on an annual basis. This supports planning and forecasting for site management actions and activities and highlights the importance of site managers being able to access recurrent funding sources for site management.

¹⁷⁴ Melbourne Water, Inquiry into Auditor-General's Report No. 202: *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands* (2016) hearing, response to questions on notice received 23 December 2019, p. 1.

¹⁷⁵ Dr Nerina Di Lorenzo, Executive General Manager Service Delivery, Melbourne Water, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

¹⁷⁶ Mr John Woodland, Manager Regional Services, Melbourne Water, Public hearing, Chelsea Heights, 3 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

5 Monitoring Ramsar sites

5.1 Summary

The Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) found that there was limited long-term, outcomes-focused monitoring for Ramsar sites in Victoria. This meant site managers were unable to evaluate whether management activities were effective in preventing a decline in the ecological character of Ramsar sites. To address this, VAGO recommended the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP):

- implement arrangements to oversee how management plans are put into effect
- lead the development of a statewide approach to monitoring the ecological character of Ramsar sites, through a specific monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) framework.¹⁷⁷

In line with the terms of reference for the inquiry, the Committee examined a range of evidence to determine the progress that had been made by DELWP to implement the audit recommendations and improve its monitoring of Ramsar sites. This included evidence from public hearings and submissions to the inquiry as well as a range of key Ramsar site documents, such as Ecological Character Descriptions (ECDs) and Ramsar Information Sheets (RIS).

DELWP has established arrangements to oversee how management plans are put into effect and has introduced a statewide approach to monitoring the ecological character of Ramsar sites. This is achieved through a specific MERI framework, supported by the online Ramsar Management System (RMS). The first full round of online reporting using the RMS to assess the ecological character of Ramsar sites will occur in 2020–21.

DELWP has collected additional data to establish limits of acceptable change (LAC) for all critical components, processes and systems (CPS) at 10 of the 12 Victorian Ramsar sites. However, the ECDs for these sites have not been updated to incorporate this information. DELWP has been meeting some of its reporting obligations to the Commonwealth, but it is not complying with the requirement that the RIS for Ramsar sites are updated every six years. RIS provide essential data on each Ramsar site to allow analysis and measure changes to their ecological character.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands: Victorian Auditor-General's Report 2016 17:3*, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Melbourne, 2016, p. xvi.

¹⁷⁸ Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, *Ramsar Documents*, 2020, <<http://environment.gov.au/water/wetlands/ramsar/documents>> accessed 1 May 2020.

5.2 The Ramsar Management System

VAGO found that reporting on the implementation of Ramsar site management plans occurred infrequently and did not inform management practices.¹⁷⁹ Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) were reporting to DELWP annually through service level agreements, however these reports were output-based and did not directly report on management actions for Ramsar sites. For those seven Ramsar sites with management plans that were incorporated into regional waterway strategies, reporting to DELWP was limited to the mid-term review and renewal of the strategy, which were scheduled to take place in 2018 and 2022 respectively.¹⁸⁰

At the time of the audit, DELWP advised VAGO that it had begun a project in October 2015, scheduled to be completed by 30 November 2016, which would deliver:

- a monitoring schedule covering the needs of all of Victoria's Ramsar sites
- an analysis of current gaps in monitoring
- a monitoring tool to help plan and oversee a monitoring program for Ramsar sites.¹⁸¹

In response to a follow-up survey undertaken by VAGO in December 2018, DELWP advised that it had addressed all of VAGO's recommendations. In listing its reported actions to implement the recommendations, DELWP highlighted the development of the RMS, which would allow state-wide oversight of management plan implementation and monitoring of the timeliness of management actions.¹⁸²

DELWP developed the online RMS in 2018. The RMS allows DELWP to track the implementation of Ramsar site management plans and monitor ecological character, utilising data provided by site managers. However, no data on sites' ecological character has been uploaded into the system yet.

5.2.1 Implementation of the Ramsar Management System

The RMS is an online system that enables DELWP to track the implementation of Ramsar site management plans and monitor ecological character.¹⁸³ The RMS was developed as a component of the statewide Ramsar MERI framework and came into use from 1 June 2018.¹⁸⁴

The RMS incorporates a tool that facilitates the prioritisation of actions to aid the monitoring of Ramsar sites. It ensures that ecological character monitoring needs are identified. It allows site managers to assess the required frequency of monitoring,

¹⁷⁹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. xiv.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁸² Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Submission 21*, p. 12.

¹⁸³ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Submission 21*, p. 12.

the time since the site was last monitored, and any detected trends in condition to determine how often the critical components, processes and systems need to be monitored.¹⁸⁵

The RMS provides a database that enables DELWP and site managers to track how management plans are being put into effect. Management plan activities have been entered into this database and progress against each activity has been recorded. As noted in Chapter 3, management plans have a duration of eight years, with most plans due for completion in 2022. At December 2019, of the 281 management plan actions listed in the database:

- 6% have been completed
- 63% are in progress
- 31% have not commenced.¹⁸⁶

FINDING 19: Through the development of the Ramsar Management System, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning has implemented arrangements to oversee how management plans are put into effect.

FINDING 20: Thirty-one per cent of the management actions listed in the Ramsar Management System have not commenced, despite most Ramsar management plans being developed in 2014. Sixty-three per cent of activities have commenced and 6% have been completed.

The RMS is being actively used by CMAs and site managers as a tool for reporting progress against their management plans. Dr Mark Norman, Chief Conservation Scientist, Parks Victoria, advised that the RMS was a great system, which enabled Parks Victoria to access better feedback on its decision-making process and management approaches.¹⁸⁷ Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland CMA, informed the Committee that the East Gippsland CMA was reporting against its management plan through the RMS.¹⁸⁸

Site managers are also required to report annually into the RMS on the ecological character of their sites. However, this process has yet to commence. Dr Will Steele, Principal Biodiversity Scientist, Integrated Planning, Melbourne Water, stated that the first round of reporting will occur at the end of 2019–20, when the limits of acceptable change will be assessed.¹⁸⁹ Dr Nerina Di Lorenzo, Executive General Manager

¹⁸⁵ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁶ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Submission 21*, p. 14.

¹⁸⁷ Dr Mark Norman, Chief Conservation Scientist, Parks Victoria, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

¹⁸⁸ Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, Public hearing, Sale, 4 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

¹⁸⁹ Dr Will Steele, Principal Biodiversity Scientist, Integrated Planning, Melbourne Water, Public hearing, Chelsea Heights, 3 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

Service Delivery, Melbourne Water confirmed this, stating that reporting for the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands and Melbourne Water's Western Treatment Plant would occur for the first time in 2019–20.¹⁹⁰ DELWP will have limited visibility of the changes that may be occurring to the ecological character of Victoria's Ramsar sites until this reporting is completed.

FINDING 21: Site managers and Catchment Management Authorities are actively reporting against their management plans using the Ramsar Management System. However, assessment of the ecological character of Victorian Ramsar sites through the Ramsar Management System will not occur until reporting is completed for 2019–20. The Ramsar Management System will improve the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's visibility of the changes that may be occurring to the ecological character of Victorian Ramsar sites.

5.3 Datasets for monitoring Ramsar sites

Appropriate scientific datasets are essential to understand changes to the ecological character of wetlands. VAGO found that the datasets available for Victorian Ramsar sites contained knowledge gaps and poor baseline data. This affected the determination of the limits of acceptable change for Ramsar sites and monitoring of the status of their ecological character.¹⁹¹ Poor datasets represent a systemic issue in Victorian Ramsar site management, with some CMAs raising concerns about the lack of data and knowledge gaps at Ramsar sites in 2014.¹⁹²

To determine the extent that DELWP had addressed the issues surrounding Ramsar datasets, the Committee examined evidence provided through public hearings and submissions. In addition, the Committee also considered key documents for Ramsar sites such as ECDs.

DELWP has implemented some programs to address data and knowledge gaps. However, they still exist for Ramsar sites in Victoria, and DELWP has not updated the ECDs for Victorian Ramsar sites to reflect new information that has been collected. This limits the ability of authorities to monitor and manage changes to ecological character over time. The coordination of datasets for Victorian Ramsar sites can also be improved to ensure that the most appropriate and up to date information is used to inform Ramsar site management.

¹⁹⁰ Dr Nerina Di Lorenzo, Executive General Manager Service Delivery, Melbourne Water, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

¹⁹¹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. xi.

¹⁹² North Central Catchment Management Authority, *2014–22 North Central Waterway Strategy*, North Central Catchment Management Authority, Huntly, 2014, p. 35.

5.3.1 Limits of acceptable change

The LACs for a site are defined as the variation that is considered acceptable in a particular component or process of the ecological character of the wetland. Exceeding an LAC indicates a change in ecological character that may lead to a reduction or loss of the criteria for which the site was Ramsar listed.¹⁹³

LACs are included in the ECD for a site, and allow the determination of changes to a wetland's ecology. LACs can be used to measure changes in hydrology, vegetation, native fish, or waterbirds. If a LAC is exceeded it may indicate that there has been an adverse change in the wetland's character.

LACs should be identified for the critical components, processes, and services (CPS) that make up the ecological character of a Ramsar site, which includes those:

- that are important determinants of the site's unique character
- that are important for supporting the Ramsar criteria under which the site was listed
- for which change is reasonably likely to occur over short or medium time scales
- that will cause significant negative consequences if change occurs.¹⁹⁴

The Auditor-General's report found that only five of the 11 Ramsar sites assessed had identified LACs for all their critical CPS. This was due to knowledge gaps and poor baseline data at the time of listing. For example, the ECD for Lake Albacutya states that there is limited information and data available to define LACs, and that those which have been defined:

... may not accurately represent the variability of the critical components, processes services and benefits under the management regime and conditions that prevailed in 1982 when the site was listed as a Ramsar wetland.¹⁹⁵

At the time of the audit, the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands site was reported as having no established LACs. This was due to the site's Ecological Character Description being prepared prior to the release of guidance on identifying critical Components Processes and Services, which form the basis for determining LACs. An addendum to the ECD for the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands site was published in 2017, which listed four critical CPS and provided LACs for each.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Limits of Acceptable Change*, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Canberra, 2012, p. 1.

¹⁹⁴ Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *National Framework and Guidance for Describing the Ecological Character of Australia's Ramsar Wetlands*, Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, Canberra, 2008, p. 18.

¹⁹⁵ Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Lake Albacutya Ramsar Wetland Ecological Character Description*, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Ballina, 2010, p. 117.

¹⁹⁶ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Addendum to Ecological Character Description for the Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands Ramsar Site*, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Melbourne, 2017.

Dr Amber Clarke, Director Waterways Programs, DELWP, informed the Committee that, following the 2017 Budget, the areas with insufficient data were targeted using funding to monitor the ecological character of Ramsar sites. As a result, limits of acceptable change have been established for all critical CPS at 10 of the 12 Victorian Ramsar sites.¹⁹⁷ However only four of the 12 ECDs for Victoria's Ramsar sites have been updated since their publication. Table 5.1 shows the current list of Victorian Ramsar sites as well as the status of their ECD.

Table 5.1 Status of Victorian Ramsar sites' Ecological Character Descriptions

Ramsar site	Listed	ECD published	ECD last updated
Barmah Forest	1982	2011	n/a
Corner Inlet	1982	2011	2017
Edithvale-Seafood Wetlands	2001	2012	2017
Gippsland Lakes	1982	2010	n/a
Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay	2018	2017	n/a
Gunbower Forest	1982	2011	n/a
Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes	1982	2011	n/a
Kerang Wetlands	1982	2011	2017
Lake Albacutya	1982	2010	n/a
Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula	1982	Not finalised	n/a
Western District Lakes	1982	2011	n/a
Western Port	1982	2010	2017

Source: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Significant Wetlands*, 2019, <<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/waterways-and-catchments/rivers-estuaries-and-waterways/wetlands/significant-wetlands>>, accessed 20 January 2020.

FINDING 22: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning has collected additional data to establish limits of acceptable change for all critical components, processes and systems at 10 of the 12 Victorian Ramsar sites. However, the Ecological Character Descriptions for these sites have not been updated to incorporate this information. This limits the usefulness of these documents to site managers determining if a change to a site's ecological character has occurred.

RECOMMENDATION 12: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning update the Ecological Character Descriptions for Victorian Ramsar sites to reflect new data collected since 2017 to enable effective assessment of, and reporting on, any changes to their ecological character.

¹⁹⁷ Dr Amber Clarke, Director Waterways Programs, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 12-13.

5.3.2 Completeness and appropriateness of datasets

During the inquiry, some stakeholders reported that the data that was being used to inform the limits of acceptable change for Ramsar sites was deficient.

Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, informed the Committee that the LAC for the salinity of Lake Wellington had been set based on model data, which impacted the formal assessment of changes to the Lake's ecological character.¹⁹⁸ In addition, the submission to the inquiry by Professor Max Finlayson, Charles Sturt University, highlighted large data gaps for the Gippsland Lakes, which were impacted by data collection weaknesses.¹⁹⁹

Professor Richard Kingsford, University of New South Wales, advised the Committee that site managers needed to access new datasets, including remote sensing data, to understand changes to the ecological character of Ramsar sites.²⁰⁰

Save Westernport submitted that there were knowledge gaps in the ECD for Westernport Ramsar site.²⁰¹

FINDING 23: Data gaps still exist for Victoria's Ramsar sites. These gaps limit the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's ability to effectively identify changes in the ecological character of sites, and ensure their effective management.

RECOMMENDATION 13: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning undertake a comprehensive audit of Ramsar sites in Victoria to identify data gaps that exist and implement a plan to prioritise and address these.

5.3.3 Dataset coordination

Enhancing efforts to streamline procedures and processes to report and to facilitate data sharing amongst parties across national, regional, and global levels is a priority area of focus in the fourth international Ramsar Strategic Plan.²⁰² There are a wide range of datasets that must be considered to effectively monitor Victorian Ramsar sites, including Living Murray program monitoring, EPA water quality monitoring, BirdLife Australia data, CMA and Melbourne Water fauna monitoring.²⁰³ The effective coordination of datasets was an issue that was raised during the inquiry.

¹⁹⁸ Mr Sean Phillipson, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

¹⁹⁹ Professor Max Finlayson, *Submission 456*, p. 4.

²⁰⁰ Professor Richard Kingsford, University of New South Wales, Public Hearing hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 49.

²⁰¹ Save Westernport, *Submission 442*, p. 9.

²⁰² Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016–2024*, Ramsar Convention Secretariat, Gland, 2016, p. 6.

²⁰³ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 12.

Dr Will Steele, Principal Biodiversity Scientist, Integrated Planning, Melbourne Water, informed the Committee of some of the practical difficulties faced with coordinating datasets for Ramsar sites. He stated that there were some issues reconciling the databases utilised by the Ramsar Secretariat with those that the Australian Government accepts. The Committee was advised that the discrepancy between these two datasets had the potential to change the LAC set for the sharp-tailed sandpiper population at the Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Ramsar site.²⁰⁴

Professor Kingsford advised the Committee that an important part of data coordination was identifying the datasets that could provide the most valuable information to inform site management. This was particularly important, as governments did not have resources to invest in too many monitoring programs.²⁰⁵

Dr Evan Hamman, Queensland University of Technology and Dr Birgita Hansen, Federation University stated that there was a need for better coordination of datasets across sectors, to ensure that data generated outside of government could be better utilised.²⁰⁶

FINDING 24: Effectively coordinating datasets is central to managing Ramsar sites. Dataset coordination for Victorian Ramsar sites could be improved.

RECOMMENDATION 14: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in collaboration with site coordinating committees, explore options to effectively coordinate the use of datasets across Victorian Ramsar sites.

5.4 Monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement

To meet their obligations under the Ramsar convention, DELWP and site managers should ensure that site management plans are effectively monitored and reviewed. However, VAGO found that limited monitoring and review occurred for Ramsar sites. This meant that site managers could not effectively evaluate the outcomes of their management activities. VAGO recommended that DELWP lead the development of a statewide approach to monitoring the ecological character of Ramsar sites, through a specific MERI framework.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Dr Will Steele, Principal Biodiversity Scientist, Integrated Planning, Melbourne Water, Public hearing, Chelsea Heights, 3 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

²⁰⁵ Professor Richard Kingsford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 48.

²⁰⁶ Dr Evan Hamman and Dr Birgita Hansen, *Submission 340*, p. 4.

²⁰⁷ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. xvi.

In December 2018 DELWP informed VAGO that a state-wide MERI framework had been finalised, which was guiding the development and finalisation of individual site MERI plans. DELWP also advised that the integration of these plans would occur over a number of years, as site managers would gradually integrate them into routine practice.²⁰⁸

DELWP has established a statewide monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement MERI framework, which forms the basis of individual MERI plans for Ramsar sites. These documents are not publicly available.



Red-necked Avocets. Photo Credit: Sean Phillipson, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority.

5.4.1 Implementing the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework

In its submission to the inquiry, DELWP informed the Committee that the implementation of MERI plans had been incorporated into the annual planning process for Ramsar sites. The MERI plans for Ramsar sites have been drafted in collaboration with DELWP, and finalised by site coordinators with their respective coordination committees.²⁰⁹ The site coordinating committees are responsible for implementing the MERI plan, and must also consider the MERI plans when developing a site's Annual Action Plan.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Submission 21*, p. 15.

²⁰⁹ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 12.

²¹⁰ Dr Amber Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

Mr Sean Phillipson, Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, informed the Committee that DELWP had been running statewide projects to develop MERI plans for Victorian Ramsar sites. The MERI plan for the Gippsland Lakes was endorsed by the site's coordinating committee in March 2019, and integrated with its annual action plan for 2019–20.²¹¹

MERI plans enable Ramsar site managers to monitor a site's ecological character and inform adaptive management, evaluation, and reporting. The plans contain a program logic that:

- sets out the relationship between the critical CPS that make up a site's ecological character
- addresses the threats to critical CPS
- lists the management actions required to reduce these threats.²¹²

In addition, MERI Plans for Ramsar sites have been incorporated into the RMS and integrate with its prioritisation tool. This enables site managers to easily update the plans and include any new information on management interventions.²¹³ Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns, DELWP, informed the Committee that the MERI framework provided DELWP with signals that enabled it to focus on positive outcomes and target sites that were facing threats to their ecological character.²¹⁴

This was confirmed by Mr John Woodland, Manager Regional Services, Melbourne Water, who advised the Committee that the MERI plan that was developed for the Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Ramsar site provided:

... the tool to track the status of ecological character; the identification of priority critical components, processes and services for monitoring the site at the site scale; the identification of priority management activities required for evaluation of the effectiveness of our controls to make sure we are actually achieving the outcomes that we intended.²¹⁵

FINDING 25: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning has established a statewide monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) framework, which forms the basis of individual MERI plans for Ramsar sites. These enable Ramsar site managers to monitor a site's ecological character and inform adaptive management, evaluation and reporting.

211 Mr Sean Phillipson, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

212 Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 12.

213 Ibid.

214 Ms Karen Lau, Executive Director Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

215 Mr John Woodland, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

5.4.2 Publication of the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework

Appropriate levels of transparency and openness encourage behaviours that stand up to public scrutiny and help to ensure community confidence in public sector decision-making processes and actions.²¹⁶ Key Ramsar documents, such as a site's Ecological Character Description, Ramsar Information Sheets and management plan are publicly available through DELWP's website.²¹⁷ However, the MERI framework and corresponding MERI plans for Ramsar sites are not publicly available documents.

The Auditor-General recommended that the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning lead the development of a statewide approach to monitoring the ecological character of Ramsar sites, through a specific monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework (recommendation 3).

FINDING 26: The state-wide monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework and individual site's monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement plans are not publicly available.

RECOMMENDATION 15: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and site coordinating committees consider making the state-wide monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) framework and MERI plans for individual Ramsar sites publicly available.

5.5 Meeting reporting obligations to the Commonwealth Government and Ramsar Secretariat

While the Commonwealth Department of the Environment holds overall responsibility for Australia's Ramsar commitment, DELWP is the main body responsible for legislation and policy for managing Victoria's wetlands.²¹⁸ To comply with its obligations under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) (the EPBC Act), DELWP must:

- adhere to national Ramsar guidelines, including management principles, management plans and the requirement to describe and report changes or potential changes to the ecological character of sites to the Commonwealth Government
- coordinate and maintain documents for Ramsar sites—including RIS, ECDs, management plans, site descriptions and maps.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Australian National Audit Office, *Public Sector Governance: Strengthening Performance through Good Governance*, Australian National Audit Office, Canberra, 2014, p. 41.

²¹⁷ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Significant Wetlands*, 2019, <<https://www.water.vic.gov.au/waterways-and-catchments/rivers-estuaries-and-waterways/wetlands/significant-wetlands>> accessed 20 January 2020.

²¹⁸ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, pp. 6–8.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

DELWP is partially meeting its reporting obligations. Although DELWP has worked with the Commonwealth Department of the Environment to report triennially on the ecological character of its Ramsar sites, this may be affected by delays in implementing reporting on the ecological character of Victorian Ramsar sites through the RMS. DELWP has not updated the Ramsar Information Sheets for its sites every six years, as required.

5.5.1 Ramsar Information Sheets

Contracting parties to the Ramsar Convention use RIS to present information on wetlands designated for the List of Wetlands of International Importance. A RIS provides information on the criteria under which a site qualifies as a Ramsar site as well as its physical, ecological, hydrological, social and cultural aspects.²²⁰ This information forms a basis to monitor and analyse the ecological character of the site and for assessing the status and trends of wetlands regionally and globally.²²¹

Under the Ramsar convention, a RIS should be produced at the time of designation. Since 1996 there has been a requirement to update a site's RIS at least every six years.²²² Further, since 2006, updating a RIS also requires information on the change in the site's ecological character, whether the site area or boundaries have changed, and a description of any changes or likely changes to the ecological character of the site.²²³

In 2016, VAGO found that Victoria was not complying with this requirement, as no Victorian Ramsar site had a current RIS. At the time, DELWP advised VAGO that RIS updates were drafted in 2005, but were not finalised by the Commonwealth Government.²²⁴

The RIS for the Kerang Wetlands Ramsar site was updated in 2019. However, 10 of the 12 Ramsar sites do not have a current RIS (Table 5.2). Most Ramsar sites have a RIS in place that is now over 20 years old. As a result, DELWP is not complying with the requirement that a RIS be updated every six years. Any variations in the characteristics of Ramsar sites such as hydrodynamics, water quality, or flora and fauna abundance, will not have been captured. Out dated RIS cannot be used to accurately inform assessments of changes to ecological character.

²²⁰ Ramsar Regional Centre - East Asia, *The Designation and Management of Ramsar sites: A Practitioner's Guide*, Ramsar Regional Centre - East Asia, Changwon City, 2017, p. 10.

²²¹ Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *The Ramsar Convention Manual: A Guide to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)*, 6th Edition, Ramsar convention Secretariat, Gland, 2013, p. 54.

²²² *Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, signed 2 February 1971, UNTS 996 (entered into force 21 December 1975), Res VI.I.

²²³ N.C. Davidson, et al., 'A review of the adequacy of reporting to the Ramsar Convention on change in the ecological character of wetlands', *Marine and Freshwater Research*, vol. 71, 2020, p. 118.

²²⁴ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 13.

Table 5.2 Status of Ramsar Information Sheets

Ramsar site	Listed	RIS last updated
Barmah Forest	1982	1999
Corner Inlet	1982	1999
Edithvale-Seafood Wetlands	2001	2001
Gippsland Lakes	1982	1999
Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay	2018	2018
Gunbower Forest	1982	1998
Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes	1982	1999
Kerang Wetlands	1982	2019
Lake Albacutya	1982	1999
Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula	1982	1999
Western District Lakes	1982	1999
Western Port	1982	1999

Source: Ramsar Secretariat, *Ramsar Sites Information Service*, 2019, <<https://rsis.ramsar.org>> accessed 17 February 2020.

FINDING 27: Updating a site’s Ramsar Information Sheet every six years is a requirement under the Ramsar Convention, and plays an important role in monitoring the ecological character of Ramsar sites. The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning is not complying with this requirement for 10 of Victoria’s 12 Ramsar sites.

RECOMMENDATION 16: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning update the Ramsar Information Sheets for all of Victoria’s Ramsar sites and implement policies to ensure that this occurs every six years, as required under the Ramsar Convention.

5.5.2 Reporting on changes to Ramsar sites

As a State Party to the Ramsar Convention, the Commonwealth Government must report on its progress in meeting its commitments under the Convention by submitting triennial National Reports to the Conference of the Contracting parties.²²⁵ In addition, under Article 3.2 of the Ramsar Convention, the Commonwealth Government must also commit itself to:

... arrange to be informed at the earliest possible time if the ecological character of any wetland in its territory and included in the List has changed, is changing or is likely to change as the result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference.²²⁶

²²⁵ The Ramsar Convention Secretariat, *The Ramsar Convention Manual*, p. 16.

²²⁶ *Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, signed 2 February 1971, UNTS 996 (entered into force 21 December 1975), art 3(2).

Information on such changes should be reported to the Ramsar Secretariat.

To comply with its obligations under the EPBC Act DELWP must report on the ecological character of its sites to the Commonwealth Government and advise it of any changes as soon as they occur.²²⁷

The Commonwealth Government established a three-year Ramsar Rolling Review Program in 2011. The Rolling Review was coordinated by states and territories to assess the status of the ecological character of each site by comparing its critical elements against the LAC. The first Rolling Review took place in 2011, with a second review conducted over 2014–15 and 2015–16.²²⁸ The first Rolling Review was funded by the Commonwealth, and the second Rolling Review was funded by the states.²²⁹ Victoria's participation in the Ramsar Rolling Review through DELWP's assessment of Ramsar sites is considered to fulfil its reporting requirements under the Ramsar Convention.²³⁰

The information from the second Ramsar Rolling Review formed the basis of Australia's National Report to the 13th Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention.²³¹ This covered the 2016–18 triennium.

At the time of the audit the Rolling Review was the only systematic process undertaken in Victoria to detect changes in the ecological character of Ramsar sites.²³² VAGO reported that the draft results from the second Rolling Review indicated that 70% of LACs had not been exceeded and 15% had been exceeded, representing three Ramsar sites. The remaining 15% had insufficient data to allow for assessment, meaning there was no assurance that a change in ecological character had not taken place.²³³

In 2017, DELWP advised the Commonwealth Department of the Environment of a potential change in ecological character at three Ramsar sites, which was reported in Australia's 2016–18 Ramsar Implementation Plan Report Against Indicators. These were the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site, due to increasing salinity, and the Barmah Forest Ramsar site, due to a decline in the extent of Moira grass.²³⁴

Dr Amber Clarke, Director Waterways Programs, DELWP, informed the Committee that the Western District Lakes Ramsar site is also facing a potential change to its ecological character due to increasing salinity.²³⁵

²²⁷ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 8.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²²⁹ Mr Andrew Evans, Director, Performance Audit, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

²³⁰ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Site Management Plan*, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Melbourne, 2018, p. 59.

²³¹ Department of the Environment and Energy, *Australia's National Report to the 13th Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention*, Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra, 2018.

²³² Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands*, p. 35.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ Department of the Environment and Energy, *Australia's Ramsar Implementation Plan 2016–2018 Report against Indicators*, Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra, 2019, pp. 9–10.

²³⁵ Dr Amber Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

There are currently no sites in Victoria that have been formally notified as having human-induced change to their ecological character. However, the Commonwealth Department of the Environment is currently investigating three sites to determine if a change to ecological character has occurred:

- Barmah Forest
- Western District Lakes
- Gippsland Lakes.²³⁶

In its submission to the inquiry, DELWP advised the Committee that it has been providing updates on the ecological character of Ramsar sites to the Commonwealth every six months from information that has been uploaded to the RMS. Additional information and monitoring data is also collated from sources such as the Living Murray program monitoring, EPA water quality monitoring, BirdLife Australia data, CMA and Melbourne Water fauna monitoring.²³⁷

FINDING 28: The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning has worked with the Commonwealth to report on the ecological character of Victorian Ramsar sites, in line with its reporting obligations for the 2016–18 triennium.

²³⁶ Mr Mark Taylor, Assistant Secretary, Wetlands Policy and Northern Water Use Branch, Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Energy, Public hearing, Melbourne, 2 December 2019, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 42.

²³⁷ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Submission 204*, p. 12.

Appendix 1

About the Inquiry

A1.1 Submissions

1	Tim Frazer
2	Bill Hampel
3	UNEP Global Mercury Partnership
4	Ross Scott
5	Kevin Chambers
6	Karen Dodd
7	Susan Rattray
8	Sue Robertson
9	Rosemary Rothstadt
10	Leanne Newson
11	Alana Tagliabue
12	David and Judith Berg
13	Sandra Kane
14	Karen Saffrin
15	Mariann Davis
16	Mark Bourke
17	Save Tootgarook Swamp
18	Virginia Becker
19	Heritage Brumby Advocates Association
20	Carl Chapman
21	Victorian Auditor-General's Office
22	Anthony Amis
23	Margaret Williams
24	Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
25	Kahlia Weir
26	Jorell Knoblock
27	Rebecca Wakeham
28	Andy Hine
29	Anna Lycett
30	Kathryn Gray
31	Belinda Mullen
32	Maggie Morgan
33	Fernando Longo
34	Sue Lafferty
35	Heremaia Titoko
36	James Clark
37	Marieke Lutterberg
38	Dulcie Sutton
39	Maddy Butler
40	Ross Findlay
41	K Riga-Jones
42	Christine Puebla
43	Patricia Whiffen
44	Leigh Farley
45	Mark Townsend
46	Ken and Roberta Crawford-Condle
47	Marion Gray
48	Jesper Hansen
49	Em Clayton
50	Fiona Kerr
51	Marcelle Kirby
52	Marlene Krelle
53	Rosie Ganino
54	Jem Wilson
55	Eliza McDonald
56	Jane Staley
57	James Hussey
58	Coralie Davies
59	Barb Rimington

60	Keith Loveridge	98	Clare Rocznio
61	Kristie Dunn	99	Kate Meadows
62	Alexis Clarke	100	Pascale Miller
63	Laura Monks	101	Elinor Hasenfratz
64	Jenny Tilleard	102	Emily Baxter
65	Michelle Wyatt	103	Nat Atherden
66	John McDermott	104	Lynne Billing
67	Frances McMurray	105	Phil Jackson
68	Gavin Imhof	106	Michelle Marshall
69	Pamela Englander	107	Uta Meyer
70	Juliet Honey	108	Michelle Hutchins
71	Sandra Morello	109	W Tan
72	Johanna Skelton	110	Monica Ferreri
73	Kirsten Wood	111	Wendy Savage
74	Campbell Gome	112	Sarah Gaskill
75	Mary Mulberry	113	Jarah Dennis
76	Robin Gardner	114	Maria Kear
77	Dirk Jansen	115	Liam Fowler
78	Heather Cooke	116	Elle Wylde
79	Niamh Murray	117	Logan Shield
80	Jaimi Dawson	118	Peter Hylands and Andrea Hylands
81	Samari Smith	119	Judith Wenborn
82	Fiona Sheridan	120	Nikkola Mikocki-Bleeker
83	Elisabeth Wallace	121	Dominic Eales
84	Sean Corrigan	122	Emily Boldiston
85	Alison Taylor	123	Jana Kalebic
86	Ingrid Jolley	124	Elizabeth Pilven
87	Pauline McKelvey	125	Elaine Stevenson
88	Terry Watt	126	Paula Hendrixx
89	Freyja McCarthy	127	Rosemary Glaisher
90	Terry Frewin	128	Christine Hooper
91	Kris Diamond	129	Amanda Gray
92	Kristy Cullen	130	Peter Signorini
93	Peter Topma	131	Jenni Baxter
94	Warren Cooke	132	Neida Thompson
95	Valentina Colombo	133	Amelia Thompson
96	Jean Christie	134	Mark Crittenden
97	Vicki Sweet	135	Robyn Gray

136	Jennifer Peters	173	Paula Hassall Dale
137	Jenny Briwn	174	Sam Wilce
138	Julie Dingle	175	Alison Baker
139	Barbara Speed	176	Narelle Huxley
140	Sandra Hawkins	177	Anita Xhafer
141	Guna Green	178	John Strieker
142	Rebecca Korossy-Horwood	179	Sarah Jowett
143	Adam Fry	180	Jo Brodie
144	Marnie Sier	181	Laura Antonakakis
145	Priscilla Guest	182	Rain Rathjen
146	Jessie Borrelle	183	Trevor Moorfield
147	Anthony Gowans	184	Gillian Quirk
148	Anton Bladh	185	Christine Matthews
149	Karen Cornell	186	Salome Argyropoulos
150	Fiona Borrelli	187	Maxine Neville
151	Nicole Williams	188	Alastair Inglis
152	Alexandra Lazarides	189	June Mac
153	Jane Dyer	190	Dianne Lukich
154	Helena Woolums	191	Warwick Sprawson
155	Colleen Brown	192	Susan Meyer
156	Anna Forehan	193	David Gentle
157	Julia Ekkel	194	Benjamin Maher
158	Wendy Robinson	195	Kirsty Ramadan
159	David Regan	196	Sarah Day
160	Louise Riley	197	Terry Turner
161	Janet Parry	198	Helen Lawrence
162	Nu Lynch	199	Cathy Warczak
163	Karin Murphy	200	Daamon Parker
164	Cameron Symons	201	Susan Liddicut
165	Bela Arora	202	Sally Allaway
166	Sarbani Deb	203	Erik Vahl Meyer
167	Kerang Lakes Land and Water Action Group	204	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
168	Tara Hickey	205	Elke Eckhard
169	Megan Fulford	206	Jasmine Williams
170	Jennifer Guthrie	207	Kerrie Kean
171	Lindy Price	208	Kate Ro
172	Nichola Carberry	209	Andrew Vallender

210	Samantha Thomson	248	Sarah Elliott
211	Marise Williams	249	Julie Woods
212	Meghan Quinlan	250	Liz Spencer
213	Jill Orr-Young	251	Susan Jane
214	John Pettigrew	252	Tim Harte
215	Gabrielle Doolan	253	Angela Grigg
216	Soolin Barclay	254	Lizzie Morcom
217	Name withheld	255	Tamsin Ramone
218	Cohen Walkerden	256	Denise Bridges
219	Sandra Shergill	257	Ingrid Cattley
220	Nola Pettett	258	Erin Osbourne
221	Richard Bazeley	259	Steve Callanan
222	Anne Hillerman	260	Kerrie Brooks
223	Sarah Day	261	Caroline Sévilla
224	Robyn Aldrick	262	Deirdre Day
225	Andrea Hylands	263	Patricia Stewart
226	Leanne Bevan	264	Diana Tomkins
227	Name withheld	265	Malcolm Dow
228	Jack & Rita Reynolds	266	Cam Gould
229	Glenys Parslow	267	Megan Castles
230	Alberta Dowling	268	Elissa Simmons
231	Sabina Ivancic	269	Aleksandar Jakovljevic
232	Melissa Kearney	270	Susan Carden
233	Corinne Plano	271	A R Polack
234	Helen Persano	272	Rachel Boyce
235	Rina Cigana	273	Amelia Greaves
236	Pam Treeby	274	Tess Lynch
237	Maria Mercedes	275	Louis Gauci
238	Sharon Kershaw	276	Peter Parsons
239	Nicole Groch	277	Helen Perry
240	Janine Cowie	278	Neil Thomason
241	Karan Balfour	279	Jacki Jacka
242	Rina Decker	280	Romy Ash
243	Tracy Bartram	281	Carolyn Knight
244	Hugh Clark	282	Rosemarie Engl
245	Lucy Busija	283	Caroline Mcgill
246	Russell Wilson	284	Ella Boyen
247	Beatrice Kennedy	285	Cathy Mitchell

286	Heather Cooke	324	Name withheld
287	Betty Moore	325	Evelyn Hamel-Green
288	Maggie Fooke	326	Jane Murphy
289	Elise Springett	327	Karin Sluiter
290	J Stone	328	Candy van Rood
291	Jacqueline Storey	329	Jen Schroeder
292	Scott Jones	330	Amelia Easdale
293	Susan Fay Nitz	331	Carol Neubauer
294	Ferg Fitz	332	Tao Weis
295	Suzy Ditterich	333	Jennifer McAuliffe
296	Susan Buckland	334	Lauren Walsh
297	John Jacobs	335	Fleur Baker
298	Bronwyn Lekos	336	Michelle Smith
299	Kellie Stoopman	337	April Meddick
300	Bridget Boson	338	Andrew Raff
301	Lisa Wilkinson	339	Deline Skinner
302	Leisa McEwan	340	Evan Hamman & Birgita Hansen
303	Liam Cranley	341	Margaret Bridger
304	Marcia Riederer	342	Valerie Curtis
305	Georgia Kelly	343	Claire McCarthy
306	Environmental Justice Australia	344	April Maynard
307	Rohan Morris	345	Mahsa Khatibi
308	Hattie Dukovic	346	Catherine Wheelahan
309	Ross Mcivor	347	Peter Signorini
310	Australian Brumby Alliance	348	Paul Lowry
311	Betty Russell	349	Noriel Williams
312	Philippa Hedges	350	Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc.
313	Anne Orman	351	M Obryan
314	Lexie Slingerland	352	Gayle Ebery
315	Glenn Michael	353	Fiona Byrnes
316	Deviani Segal	354	Arthur Byrnes
317	Belinda Oppenheimer	355	Susan Farr
318	Adam Mark	356	Veronica Sive
319	Sophie Neubauer	357	Joe Erftemeyer
320	Tanveer A	358	Joe Erftemeyer
321	Amanda Withey	359	Janis Meyers
322	Jen Petinatos	360	Jane Howlett
323	Visho Zeqaj		

361	Salome Argyropoulos	398	Wildlife Victoria
362	Coalition Against Duck Shooting	399	Clare Nesdale
363	Ibina Cundell	400	David Mould
364	Yvonne Lynch	401	AGL Energy Limited
365	Jenny Honda	402	Victorian National Parks Association
366	St Arnaud Field Naturalist Club Inc.	403	Neil Campbell
367	Marni Howard	404	Joel Ellis
368	Jo Hunter	405	Name withheld
369	Anne Harding	406	Geelong Duck Rescue
370	Lois O'Connor	407	Sunita Vince
371	Lloyd M	408	Anne-Maree Burgoine
372	Sale Field and Game Association	409	Victorian Farmers Federation
373	Maurice Schinkel	410	Susan Williams
374	Domino Cupak	411	Jill Friedman
375	Alasdair Moodie	412	Nathalie Casal
376	Name withheld	413	Trish Stuart
377	Lucy Ivey	414	Deirdre Nicol
378	Anita Pike	415	Bird Life
379	Joanne Keith	416	Environment Victoria
380	Steve Friedman	417	Name withheld
381	Liz Filmer	418	Celia Smith
382	Name withheld	419	Name withheld
383	Fiona McDonald	420	Andrea Brown
384	Trust for Nature	421	Natalie Kopas
385	Greg Hunt	422	Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations
386	Kate Stuart	423	Terese Dalman
387	Deni Odium	424	Catherine Vogel
388	Lynne Kelly	425	Deborah Misuraca
389	Friends of Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Incorporated	426	Roxane Ingleton
390	Name withheld	427	Ross Nimmo
391	Gannawarra Shire Council	428	Denise Wingit
392	Sue Leitinger	429	Lindsey Duffield
393	Jennifer Wells	430	Mark Patton
394	Diana Domonkos	431	Alan Cosham
395	Glenn Capuano	432	Emilia Storm
396	Greening Australia	433	Kate Ellis
397	Tina Mayling	434	Cam Robbins

435	Suzanne Lawton-Clark
436	Sian Priya Woolston
437	Anna Howard
438	Kath Dolheguy
439	Karri Giles
440	Robyna Cozens
441	Rosemary West
442	Save Westernport
443	Downs Estate Community Project
444	Deviani Segal
445	Celia Moriarty
446	John Wilkins

447	Adelaide Fisher
448	Elizabeth Attard
449	Ed Keating
450	Jackie Tritt
451	Melissa Whiting
452	Judy Gunson
453	Save Yarram Group
454	East Gippsland Shire Council
455	Barpa Land and Water
456	Max Finlayson
457	Bunurong Land Council

A1.2 Public hearings

Monday 2 December 2019

55 St Andrews Place, East Melbourne

Name	Title	Organisation
Mr Andrew Greaves	Victorian Auditor-General	Victorian Auditor-General's Office
Mr Andrew Evans	Director, Performance Audit	
Ms Helen Vaughn	Deputy Secretary, Water and Catchments	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
Ms Karen Lau	Executive Director, Catchments, Waterways, Cities and Towns	
Ms Annie Volkering	Executive Director, Land Management Policy	
Dr Amber Clarke	Director, Waterways Programs	
Dr Andrea White	Manager, Wetland Program	
Dr Nerina Di Lorenzo	Executive General Manger, Service Delivery	Melbourne Water
Mr John Woodland	Manager, Regional Services (South-East)	
Mr Aaron Zanatta	Team Leader, Liveability and Systems Integration, Western Treatment Plant	
Dr William Steele	Principal Biodiversity Scientist, Integrated Planning	
Dr Mark Norman	Chief Conservation Scientist	Parks Victoria
Mr Phil Pegler	Manager, Conservation Planning and Programs	
Ms Kathryn Stanislawski	Statewide Lead, Ecological Water	
Ms Janine Haddow	Chairperson	Victorian Environmental Assessment Council
Mr Paul Peake	Senior Project Manager	
Mr Mark Taylor	Assistant Secretary, Wetlands Policy and Northern Water Use Branch	Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Energy
Professor Richard Kingsford	Director, Centre for Ecosystem Science	University of New South Wales

Tuesday 3 December 2019

Edithvale-Seaford Wetland Education Centre, 278 Edithvale Road, Chelsea Heights

Name	Title	Organisation
Mr John Woodland	Manager, Regional Services (South East)	Melbourne Water
Dr Will Steele	Principal Biodiversity Scientist, Integrated Planning	
Ms Sarah Harris	Waterways and Land Officer, Westernport/ Peninsula, South East Regional Services	
Mr Paul Rees	Senior Asset Practitioner—Habitat, Catchment, Land and Waterway Services	
Mr Phil Cantillon	Chief Executive Officer	Frankston City Council
Mr Stuart Caldwell	Manager Planning and Environment	
Mr Martin Poole	Manager Commercial Services	
Mr Alan Wallis	Coordinator Parks and Vegetation	
Ms Clare Warren	Coordinator Environmental Planning	
Ms Margaret Hunter	Secretary	Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands

Wednesday 4 December 2019

Port of Sale (Wellington Centre), Wellington Room, 70 Foster Street, Sale

Name	Title	Organisation
Mr John Hirt	President, Sale branch	Field & Game Australia
Mr Peter Warner	Conservation Officer, Sale branch	
Mr Gary Howard	Project Manager, Heart Morass rehabilitation project	Wetlands Environmental Taskforce
Mr Peter Reefman	President, East Gippsland Landcare Network	Landcare Victoria
Mr Graeme Dear	Chief Executive Officer	East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority
Mr Sean Phillipson	Gippsland Lakes Program Coordinator	

