

Government response to PAEC Inquiry tabled 16 June 2020

Response to recommendations from the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into Auditor-General's Report No. 202: *Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands (2016)*

Background

The Victorian Government has a strong foundation of managing and investing in its Ramsar wetlands. In December 2019, the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) held an Inquiry into the Victorian Auditor General's Office (VAGO) performance audit 'Meeting obligations to protect Ramsar wetlands.' The objectives of the Inquiry were to examine the progress made to implement the VAGO audit recommendations, identify any issues with that implementation, and investigate new issues that may have arisen since the report was tabled.

The Inquiry determined that all VAGO audit recommendations were implemented and included a further 28 findings and 16 recommendations to improve Ramsar management in Victoria (across governance, management, funding and monitoring). Table 1 below provides the Victorian Government response to each recommendation; work is already underway in the Ramsar management program to address these recommendations with the delivery of government's response being built into current work programs.

The Ramsar Interagency Governance Group (IAGG) was established to oversee the implementation of VAGO audit recommendations, with representation from DELWP, Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water and catchment management authorities. The role of IAGG has more recently expanded to oversee the implementation of the Victorian Ramsar program more broadly, including overseeing the implementation of PAEC recommendations.

The Ramsar program will continue to be supported as part of the 2020-21 Victorian State Budget initiative to improve waterway and catchment health, investing \$11.5 million over four years in Ramsar site management. A further \$5 million has been allocated to the Ramsar program over the next three years through the 2021-22 State Budget initiative "Supporting regional communities and economic recovery through healthy waterways".

DELWP, in consultation with the Ramsar IAGG, has prepared this response to PAEC recommendations in accordance with the Whole of Victorian Government Guidelines for Submissions and Responses to Inquiries.

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Table 1. Government response to the 16 recommendations of the PAEC Inquiry into the Auditor-General's Report No. 202: *Meeting obligations to protect Ramsar wetlands*

ID	PAEC recommendation	Government response and rationale	Implementation strategy
Governance arrangements for Ramsar sites			
1	Melbourne Water and Frankston City Council finalise a memorandum of understanding that clarifies the roles and legal responsibilities for the Seaford Wetlands.	Support in full DELWP agrees with finding #3 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that Melbourne Water and Frankston City Council's responsibilities for the Seaford Wetlands have not yet been formalised; formalising responsibilities between them through a maintenance agreement (more relevant for this situation) will support effective management.	IN PROGRESS – Due to be completed June 2022 Melbourne Water and Frankston City Council are in process of finalising a maintenance agreement that clarifies the roles and legal responsibilities for the Seaford Wetlands.
2	DELWP, 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.	Support in full DELWP agrees with finding #6 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that meaningful engagement with Traditional Owners is not embedded across all Victorian Ramsar sites. The implementation of a best practice strategy will be informed by the principles of self-determination and agreed in partnership with relevant Traditional Owners for each site. Action to be supported by update to the IAGG Terms of Reference outlining requirement for CMAs to partner with Traditional Owners in Ramsar site management, including funding to support Traditional Owner site coordinating committee representatives to prepare for and attend meetings.	IN PROGRESS – Due to be completed June 2022 (implementation between 2022-2024) The Terms of Reference and roles and responsibilities for IAGG will be reviewed and updated by June 2022 to ensure self-determination is embedded within the Victorian governance framework for Ramsar management. This will be informed by <i>Pupangarli Marnmarnepu</i> (DELWP's Self Determination Reform Strategy). <i>Implementation activities</i> Each region to complete by 2024 Ramsar site coordinators will engage directly with Traditional Owners to understand how they would like to be involved in each Ramsar site's management and committee, with agreement captured in the Terms of Reference for site coordination.
Management of Ramsar sites			
3	DELWP, in collaboration with the catchment management authorities and site managers, update the management plans for Victoria's Ramsar sites to	Support in full DELWP agrees with finding #7 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that (at the time of the VAGO audit) DELWP had not updated all the management plans to ensure they adhere with the management	COMPLETED Since the publication of the VAGO audit report DELWP has finalised Ramsar site management plans for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Site, the

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include management actions to address high priority threats such as climate change.

principles for Ramsar sites. As a result, most of the management plans at that point did not include actions to address high priority threats, as recommended by the Auditor General.

DELWP has already undertaken a project to improve Ramsar management plans embedded in regional waterway strategies as these plans were determined by VAGO not to meet the Australian Ramsar Management Principles.

Western Port Ramsar Site, and the Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay Ramsar Site. These plans target highest priority threats and meet requirements set out in the Australian Ramsar Management Principles.

Interim Ramsar site management plans were developed for six sites - Gunbower Forest, Kerang Lakes, Barmah Forest, Western District Lakes, Corner Inlet and Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes - to address points identified by the VAGO audit and a subsequent analysis of these plans against the Australian Ramsar Management Principles (ARMPs), including high priority threats. The Lake Albacutya Plan was included in the scope of this project but was found to meet all requirements of the ARMPs and did not require an interim Ramsar management plan. These interim plans complement the Ramsar site management plans embedded in regional waterway strategies; they do not replace them.

DELWP, in consultation with site coordinators, has agreed on and implemented an annual action planning and reporting framework. This requires site coordinators, in consultation with site coordinating committees, to develop and implement annual action plans which identify and address highest priority threats from the site management plans.

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

Support in principle

DELWP agrees with finding #8 of the PAEC Inquiry which found the timelines for updating Ramsar management plans contained within regional waterway strategies (seven sites) are not aligned with the timeframe set out in the ARMPs that a Ramsar site's management plan is reviewed every seven years.

The Victorian Waterway Management Strategy states that regional waterway strategies (RWS) will incorporate Ramsar site management planning unless the complexity of management arrangements for the site warrants an individual management plan. This allows site coordinators to complete risk assessments, prioritisation of management actions, and stakeholder and community consultation, when also doing so for the catchment management region at large, avoiding process duplication and engagement fatigue. RWS are renewed every eight years, with seven Ramsar site management plans embedded in RWS: Gunbower Forest, Kerang Lakes, Barmah Forest,

COMPLETED (note all sites have current plans in place, individual plans for seven sites to be reviewed in 2023-24, other sites as according to seven-year deadline)

Site management plans for Gunbower Forest, Kerang Lakes, Barmah Forest, Western District Lakes, Corner Inlet, Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes and Lake Albacutya, will be reviewed in 2023-24 (noting that plan renewal was completed in 2020 as part of VAGO response) and will be updated within the seven-year timeframe. DELWP, in collaboration with IAGG, will oversee.

DELWP, with IAGG, will ensure that stand alone Ramsar site management plans will be renewed every seven years for Gippsland Lakes, Westernport, Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula, Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay, and Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands. The site plan for Gippsland Lakes is due to begin the renewal process this year and has been funded by DELWP.

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Western District Lakes, Corner Inlet, Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes, Lake Albacutya.

RWS are due for renewal by 2024. DELWP work with IAGG to decide on any potential change in policy.

5 DELWP work with Ramsar site coordinating committees to ensure that annual action plans:

a. link activities to management actions and critical components, processes, and services

b. contain appropriate risk registers that comply with the Victorian Government's Risk Management Framework.

Support in full

DELWP agrees with finding #10 of the PAEC Inquiry which found the activities in the annual action plans need to be aligned with management actions and critical components, processes, and services. This will ensure actions are targeted towards maintaining/improving the ecological character of Ramsar sites as per DELWP's obligations under the Ramsar Convention. DELWP agrees with finding #11 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that half of the annual action plans developed for Victorian Ramsar sites do not contain a risk register and that the risk registers that have been developed do not comply with the Victorian Government Risk Management Framework. The Victorian Government's Risk Management Framework has been reviewed for appropriate application to the Ramsar annual action plans.

ONGOING – business as usual activity (annual)

DELWP will continue to review annual action plans each year, as developed by site coordinators, to ensure that

- They meet DELWP requirements;
- Activities are linked to management actions and critical components, processes, and services; and
- They include compliant risk registers.

6 DELWP evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the first round of annual action plans in managing Ramsar sites, to inform future annual action plans.

Support in full

DELWP agrees with this recommendation, and with finding #12 of the PAEC Inquiry which found the first round of reporting against annual action plans was not to occur until September 2020, and as a result, it is too early in the implementation of the annual action planning process to determine its effectiveness.

Delivery of the 2019/20 Ramsar annual action plans was impacted by the covid pandemic, also affecting the subsequent reporting timeframes associated with these plans. A review of annual action plans will now occur in 2022.

IN PROGRESS – Due to be completed August 2022

In delivering the Victorian framework for managing Ramsar sites, developed following the VAGO audit, DELWP will continue to review the initial annual action plans to ensure they are effective and fit for purpose.

DELWP is currently scoping a formal evaluation and seeking to engage an external consultant to undertake this work.

7 DELWP in collaboration with Melbourne Water ensure that the Ecological Character Descriptions for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site are

Support in full

DELWP agrees with finding #13 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that the Ecological Character Descriptions for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site has not been published.

COMPLETED

The ECD for Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula is finalised and [published on the DELWP website](#).

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finalised and published as soon as possible.

As the site coordinator for the Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar site, Corangamite CMA has worked with DELWP to complete the Ecological Character Description (ECD) for the site. Melbourne Water was engaged in the process through the Steering Committee. The final ECD has been endorsed by the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment, and has been [published on the DELWP website](#).

Ramsar site funding

8 DELWP 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.

Support in Principle

DELWP agrees with finding #14 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that recurrent funding (for Ramsar management) had not been allocated beyond 2019/20.

Ramsar funding is provided from the Commonwealth's National Landcare Program and Victoria's Environmental Contribution (EC). The EC is a funding source that is allocated through four-year cycles as part of the Victorian Government State Budget process. Ramsar management is strongly aligned with the EC's legislated objectives to promote more sustainable management of water and address adverse water-related environmental impacts and will continue to be a priority for EC investment. However, the exact amount of funding allocated will vary depending on changing needs, the level of each tranche of the EC and the balance relative to other investment priorities.

ONGOING – business as usual activity

Ramsar management funding will continue to be included in EC fund business cases every four years.

COMPLETE – 2020-2024

For the current EC period (2020-2024), the Ramsar program is being supported as part of the 2020/21 Victorian State Budget initiative to improve waterway and catchment health (\$11.5 million for Ramsar site management over four years), plus \$5 million over three years through the 2021/22 State Budget initiative "Supporting regional communities and economic recovery through healthy waterways".

9 DELWP 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.

Support in principle

DELWP agrees with finding #15 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that management of Victoria's Ramsar sites relies heavily on grants and fixed-term funding sources.

Ramsar management is funded primarily through Victoria's Environmental Contribution (EC), provided in four-year tranches. Ramsar management is strongly aligned with the EC's legislated objectives and will continue to be a priority for EC investment. Parks Victoria resources its core long term management and site maintenance activities primarily from its base funding. However, as a land manager at many Ramsar sites, and as members on the site coordinating committees, Parks Victoria is often a delivery partner in Ramsar site management. As such, the site coordinator (CMA or Melbourne Water) can contract Parks Victoria to undertake prioritised

ONGOING – business as usual activity

Where feasible, site coordinators (CMAs and Melbourne Water) will contract Parks Victoria to undertake priority actions, as per the Ramsar site management plan and annual action plans, as relevant to Parks Victoria business. Priority management activities are identified using a risk-based approach so that available investment targets Ramsar values most at risk at each site.

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actions (as per the Ramsar management plan and the annual action plan) relevant to their business.

10 DELWP 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.

Support in full

DELWP agrees with finding #16 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that 38% 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.

Estimated costs of activities will be included in future annual action plans, noting that costs may change from time to time due to weather conditions, contractor availability, or other unforeseen delays.

ONGOING – business as usual activity

DELWP is working with site coordinators to have all activities in annual action plans costed.

The development of 2020/21 annual action plans and the costing of activities was impacted by delays in the State Budget. The next annual action plans will be developed by end March 2022, in line with contracts that were updated to include the additional funding provided through the 2021/22 State Budget.

11 DELWP and Parks Victoria calculate the ongoing annual costs of managing Victoria's Ramsar sites, to better inform future management of the sites.

Support in full

DELWP agrees with finding #17 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that DELWP 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.

DELWP will continue to monitor the costs of managing Victoria's Ramsar sites with site coordinators, including CMAs and Parks Victoria, in order to understand ongoing annual costs. Note that costs are likely to vary from year to year, depending on conditions and newly emerging threats to the Ecological Character. As per the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy, management actions must be prioritised, to make most efficient and effective use of funding available.

ONGOING – business as usual activity

DELWP is working with coordinators to ensure they fully cost activities in annual action plans (including management costs for delivery agencies). Understanding of the ongoing annual costs of managing Victoria's Ramsar sites will be built up over time.

Monitoring Ramsar sites

12 DELWP 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.

Support in part

DELWP agrees in part with finding #22 of the PAEC Inquiry. Since the 2016 VAGO audit, DELWP has collected additional data to establish limits of acceptable change for all critical components, processes, and services at 10 of the 12 Victorian Ramsar sites, and has completed and published Ecological Character Description (ECD) addenda for four sites,

IN PROGRESS - Due for completion by 2024

DELWP is working with the Commonwealth to finalise ecological character description addenda currently in draft as soon as possible (Barmah Forest, Gippsland Lakes, Western District Lakes, Gunbower Forest).

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(Kerang Wetlands, Corner Inlet, Edithvale-Seafood and Western Port), making these now up to date (Note that ECDs for Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula, Glenelg Estuary and Discovery Bay and Hattah-Kulkyne Wetlands are current and did not require an addenda). ECD addenda for the other four sites are in draft (Barmah Forest, Gippsland Lakes, Western District Lakes, and Gunbower Forest). DELWP is currently working with the Commonwealth to finalise these.

This is compliant with the [National Framework and Guidance for Describing Ecological Character of Australian Ramsar Wetlands](#), which outlines three circumstances for updating an ecological character description – further substantial data, knowledge, or resources are available to improve the original description; the boundaries of the site are extended; or the wetland has undergone favourable human-induced changes.

Note the Commonwealth is currently reviewing the National Framework and Guidance to be consistent with Ramsar Convention Resolutions. This may have implications for implementation of this recommendation.

Approval of ECD changes is the role of the Commonwealth, other jurisdictions are not able to approve ECDs or ECD addenda. The 2024 deadline included here acknowledges that this may be a lengthy process.

Any changes to the National Framework and Guidance that result from the current Commonwealth review would require agreement of all jurisdictions via the Wetland and Aquatic Ecosystem Sub-Committee. It is likely to be a lengthy process.

DELWP's preference is to finalise the outstanding four addenda before changes are made to the national guidelines.

- 13 DELWP undertake a comprehensive audit of Ramsar sites in Victoria to identify data gaps that exist and implement a plan to prioritise and address these.

Support in principle

DELWP agrees with finding #23 which found that data gaps still exist for Victoria's Ramsar sites. Where they occur, these gaps limit DELWPs ability to effectively identify changes in the ecological character of sites and ensure their effective management.

DELWP has developed an online monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) tool which includes a risk-based method to ensure that the most important data gaps are identified and prioritised for funding. Site coordinators use this information when developing annual action plans. This tool also allows DELWP to identify data gaps across the state and prioritise funding accordingly.

COMPLETED – incorporated into business as usual activity

Through the online MERI tool, DELWP has a good understanding of data gaps and how they should be prioritised.

DELWP will continue to require site coordinators to utilise the online MERI tool's risk analysis component to prioritise data gaps for their sites.

- 14 DELWP in collaboration with site coordinating committees, explore options to effectively coordinate the use of datasets across Victorian Ramsar sites.

Support in full

DELWP support in full finding #24 of the PAEC Inquiry which found dataset coordination for Victorian Ramsar sites could be improved. Coordination of datasets across Victoria will ensure research and monitoring effort is not duplicated, saving time and resources.

IN PROGRESS - Due for completion 2024

DELWP, in consultation with Ramsar site coordinators, is exploring issues around the use and accessibility of data sets across Victoria and identify potential options for improvement (to be undertaken in combination with the review of annual action plans for Recommendation 6).

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15 DELWP and site coordinating committees consider making the statewide monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) framework and MERI plans for individual Ramsar sites publicly available.

Support in principle

DELWP agrees with finding #26 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that the state-wide monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) framework, and individual site MERI plans, are not publicly available.

DELWP have considered this recommendation by holding a workshop with site coordinators to explore the option of making MERI plans publicly available. Feedback from coordinators was shared with IAGG who made the decision that the publication of individual site MERI plans would be at the discretion of individual agencies.

COMPLETED

It was agreed with IAGG that DELWP will support agencies that intend to make MERI plans public and will continue to discuss merit in the publication of individual site MERI plans.

IN PROGRESS – Due for completion June 2022

DELWP is working with IAGG to endorse publication of the state-wide MERI framework publicly available on the DELWP website.

16 DELWP 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.

Support in principle

DELWP agrees in principle with finding #27 of the PAEC Inquiry which found that DELWP is not complying with Ramsar Information Sheets (RIS) update requirements for 10 of Victoria's 12 Ramsar sites.

RIS updates are a shared responsibility between the States and Territories, the Commonwealth, and the Ramsar Convention. Endorsement is required at each level of governance and delays in the publication of RIS updates are often outside of DELWP's control.

DELWP will continue to work closely with the Commonwealth to endorse RIS updates for each site and submit to the Convention every 6 years.

IN PROGRESS – Due for completion July 2022

DELWP is working with the Commonwealth to update the remaining four out-of-date RIS and submit these to the Convention as soon as possible.

ONGOING – business as usual activity

Since the tabling of the PAEC report Ramsar Information Sheets for Western Port and Gunbower Forest have been endorsed by the Commonwealth and provided to the Convention. RIS still requiring an update include Port Phillip Bay (Western Shoreline) and Bellarine Peninsula Ramsar Site, Barmah Forest Ramsar Site, Gippsland Lakes Ramsar Site, and Western District Lakes Ramsar Site. Drafts have been prepared and DELWP is working with the Commonwealth to finalise. DELWP will work closely with the Commonwealth to endorse RIS updates for each site and submit these to the Ramsar Convention every 6 years.