



FOR LIFE

keeping water flowing

LIFEstory

Pipeline a win for all but regional catchment leader worries drought memories are fading

By Melissa Pouliot for GWMWater

Less than five years ago, luxury waterfront homes in Horsham in Western Victoria overlooked a cracked dry river bed. And as people gathered for outdoor events or activities alongside the Wimmera River that runs through the regional city, they didn't have to find a bridge to cross; they could easily walk from one side to the other, sidestepping the rare puddle or boggy hole.

In a classic show of inland Australia's boom and bust cycle, today presents a whole different view.

The wet summer of 2010-11 filled the river from end to end as well as lakes and wetlands across the entire landscape.

As the region settles back into a 17-year dry stretch with only the flood summer as an exception, continued river health is largely thanks to the region's biggest project in 100 years – the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline.

Environmental water releases made possible via water savings from the pipeline are keeping the fish, birds and animals that rely upon the river happy.

The community is also making the most of having its river back for recreational pursuits such as fishing, rowing, water skiing and the simple enjoyment of a barbecue or picnic on the water's edge.

A more resilient landscape where water can be managed more efficiently is one of the key benefits of the pipeline, Wimmera Catchment Management Authority chief executive David Brennan says.

For example, the Wimmera River hasn't experienced the shocks and losses of water experienced during pre-pipeline droughts despite the dry conditions since the floods.

"The Wimmera River is one of the region's key water resources," he says. "It provides a critical and permanent water source for communities its entire 350-kilometre length and refuge for a large number of wildlife including birds, fish and land animals.

"Environmental water releases into the river made possible by pipeline water savings are keeping this river system healthy even when times are dry."

Mr Brennan says the pipeline has also enabled more efficient water management and helped minimise the shocks boom and bust cycles can present.

"If you look back over the last decade, the Wimmera has seen all extremes – severe long-term drought, floods and now back into dry conditions.

"It is a continuing cycle that communities and the environment are continually forced to adapt to as best we can, and the pipeline gives us an opportunity to adapt with more security and confidence."

Mr Brennan says the pipeline has presented new opportunities in environmental water management. The CMA is will soon release its new Wimmera Waterway Strategy for the next eight years.

“It’s important to share our water wealth regionally for the benefit of everyone - the community, economy and environment.”

“The pipeline allows for environmental planning and certainty for a number of years ahead – giving all water entitlement holders an opportunity to predict water availability with an increased level of confidence.”

Mr Brennan admits the security the pipeline provides can be a double-edged sword because people can become complacent about water.

“Even with a fully-piped water system, our landscape remains subject to the forces of nature, particularly in drought. The pipeline has radically changed our landscape from an environmental point of view, as well as economically and socially. This means people can forget what it was like not to have a secure, quality water supply for our recreational water such as rivers and lakes and to become complacent.

“We all need to remember the dry arid landscape which is our home, and that even with a pipeline we do not have an over-abundance of water.”

