

**Report about meeting of community Supporters of Winton Wetland
With representatives of the Victorian Environment Minister, Treasurer
and the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action (DEECA)**

15th July 2025

Three members of Supporters of Winton Wetland (SWW) attended the online meeting; Jane Rushworth, Peter Holmes and Hamish McPherson.

We meet with key staff advisors from the offices of Steve Dimopoulos (Victorian Environment Minister), Jaclyn Symes (Victorian Treasurer, MLC Northern Victoria) and officials from DEECA who are directly involved in managing the transition to DEECA management of Winton Wetlands.

The above persons were well informed about the situation at Winton Wetlands, genuinely engaged and are actively involved in the process. They had read our submission (attached) and appreciated our constructive, solutions focused approach to the problem.

We introduced the meeting by speaking about the immense value and significance of Winton Wetlands in all spheres; environmental, scientific, educational, social and economic. We gave examples of community engagement with the facilities and programs of the Winton Wetlands.

We identified the Winton Wetlands as a key public asset for the State of Victoria and stated that we welcome the Victorian Government and DEECA taking over direct management of the site. We described this as a great opportunity for Government to play a leadership role in ensuring the ongoing operation and success of Winton Wetlands, in partnership with community including First Peoples, environmental groups, scientists, education providers and citizens more generally.

Our general points were well understood and received by the Government and Department representatives. They explained that a great deal of work is being done to ensure a good transition to DEECA management on the 1st August. This includes detailed consultation and co-ordination with the existing Committee of Management and CEO, Yorta Yorta representatives, staff members and other key stakeholders.

We then discussed in some detail each of the four key Winton Wetlands programs that need to be supported to continue or resume operation in the short term and to flourish in the longer term;

1. Land Management
2. Ecological and Scientific
3. First Peoples and Cultural Heritage
4. Community Hub, Café and Education Centre

Meeting information and outcomes in each of the above areas was as follows;

1. Land Management

The DEECA representative agreed that all land management facilities, equipment and programs need to be continued to ensure high quality management of the complex 9,000 hectare site. They informed us that existing maintenance staff will be retained as dedicated on site employees. This will commence from 1 August for at least 12 months, by which time a longer term plan will be in place.

2. Ecological and Scientific Programs

DEECA and Ministerial representatives agreed that the existing environmental and scientific programs and partnerships are highly valuable and essential to maintain. Intensive work is being done to make this possible, including to ensure that existing grants and purposes are fulfilled. They assured us that the Wetlands ecological restoration would continue as the key goal.

DEECA is liaising with the existing expert Environment Strategy Advisory Panel to continue the wetland restoration work. A review of the current Strategic Plan will be conducted to inform the development of a new plan moving forward.

Retaining an ecologist on staff is being considered as part of the above process, however a final decision has not been made. We advocated for this position and programs to be funded and continued.

DEECA is also considering establishing an Investment Prospectus to support the scientifically informed ecological restoration. This could supplement Government funds with investments from relevant environmental organisations, philanthropic group, entities such as water catchment authorities and the Federal Government. We welcomed this idea but emphasised the importance of recurrent Government funding to provide a solid foundation and ensure viability.

3. First Peoples and Cultural Heritage

We spoke about the importance of recognising and enacting self-determined land management by First Peoples and traditional owners, in accordance with the recommendations of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. We referred to local examples growing community recognition of the injustices of land dispossession that occurred with colonisation in the Benalla region, and of positive community actions and partnerships around these issues.

DEECA and Ministerial representatives agreed that self-determined land management by First Peoples and traditional owners is essential and assured us that constructive discussions are being held with Yorta Yorta leaders to ensure this is achieved.

4. Community Hub, Café and Education Centre

We explained how the above three facilities are essential for community engagement and fulfilling the wider goals of Winton Wetlands (environmental, social, recreational, educational, tourism, economic).

The DEECA representative stated that they are very keen to put in place arrangements to ensure that all three facilities are open, operating and available for community use as soon as possible.

There will be a Public Expression of Interest process established for all three facilities to seek community, public or commercial entities to make use of or operate each facility.

In relation to the Café, all equipment is being kept on site to enable future re-opening. The DEECA representative also referred to the prospect of 'favourable lease arrangements' being offered to potential operators. It was acknowledged that this could be a commercial operator or possibly a social enterprise model.

Other general points discussed were:

- The need for stable, recurring Government funding to provide a strong foundation for key facilities and programs.
- The positive benefits of continued community engagement and partnerships to support the Winton Wetlands. Consideration is being given to future management or governance arrangements to make this possible.
- The need for clear information to be publicly provided to the Benalla and wider regional communities about the situation and progress on points described in this report. Everyone agreed with this and information will be released to the media and public in coming weeks, when arrangements are finalised. 1st August is a key date around which this will occur.

Overall the meeting was very positive and constructive. We felt re-assured that the situation is being actively managed by the Minister and DEECA to ensure good outcomes.

We agreed to meet again in about a month to receive and update on progress and to continue the consultation and partnership in support of Winton Wetlands.

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