

# MEDIA RELEASE

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2008

## RELIEF FOR VICTORIA'S STRESSED WETLANDS

A joint environmental water release announced today for northern Victoria will provide urgent respite for Victoria's ailing wetlands and threatened species that depend on them.

Six gigalitres (GL) of Living Murray water from the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC), together with up to 11 GL of Victorian environmental water, will target critical sites needing urgent watering.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) will provide water for critical drought refuges in key areas in the north-central, Goulburn-Broken and Mallee catchments.

DSE Executive Director of Sustainable Water, Environment and Innovation, Dr Jane Doolan, said that the number of water birds in eastern Australia has fallen dramatically due to the drought and the watering is urgently needed to provide drought refuges for these birds and other species.

MDBC Chief Executive Dr Wendy Craik AM said the Living Murray water used at Lindsay Walpolla in the Mallee would help prevent 200 year old River Red Gums from dying.

The environmental watering program will include the Gunbower Wetlands north-west of Echuca; Little Lake Boort west of Echuca; the Lindsay-Walpolla icon site in the Mallee; and the Reedy, Kinnaird, Black and Moodies swamps near Shepparton subject to delivery constraints.

"Drought has had a dramatic impact on water birds with numbers falling by two-thirds compared to a normal year. Drought refuges are vital for water birds as well as other species such as Murray Cod, tortoises and frogs," Dr Doolan said.

Dr Craik said that water from the Living Murray program would provide respite to the drought refuges and also to stressed River Red Gums.

"Without the use of a small amount of water many of the River Red Gums in northern Victoria will die," Dr Craik said.

"Latest studies show that around 70 per cent of River Red Gums are declining or dead," Dr Craik said.

"This environmental water will target critical sites that have not received water since spring 2006 and areas that provide habitat to threatened species," she said.

Dr Doolan said the 11 gigalitres (GL) of Victorian environmental water represented less than one per cent of consumptive allocations in the Murray and Goulburn systems.

"We're all affected by the drought in different ways but I hope the community will support this small but valuable contribution to keeping our heritage alive," Dr Doolan said.

.....2

“The Living Murray water contributing to the autumn watering program is aimed at preventing irreversible damage to the environment which is under severe and increasing stress after 11 years of drought,” Dr Craik said.

“Latest studies show that around 70 per cent of River Red Gums along the Victorian Murray River are declining or dead. We are watering 1400 hectares which is only 1.4 per cent of the Victorian River Red Gums.”

Watering will help save more than 10,000 River Red Gums in the Mallee region. These trees provide vital habitat to Commonwealth and State-listed threatened species. Around 50 Scar (canoe) trees, of high value to the indigenous population are also at risk without the water.

Dr Doolan and Dr Craik noted that the watering of wetlands and other drought refuges not only acted to protect threatened species such as the Murray Cod, but also had tourism and community benefits.

“When Hattah Lakes received water several years ago, visitor numbers increased by 20 to 30 per cent and camping increased by 50 per cent,” Dr Doolan said.

“And at Gunbower, where the community recently expressed concern about odours from the creek, watering will raise creek levels and improve amenity.

“At Little Lake Boort, watering will lessen the chance of fish kills and provide refuge for all kinds of species at this popular local recreational site,” Dr Doolan said.

The water being used is an environmental entitlement, legally set aside to protect rivers and wetlands. Use of the water does not affect anyone else’s water allocations.

“Watering in Autumn minimises evaporation and the volume of water needed, meaning the best outcome for our wetlands, with the most efficient use of our precious water resources,” Dr Craik said

“This 17GL is the only water we have this year to keep our wetlands healthy so we have to use it wisely,” Dr Doolan said.

#### **Notes to Editors:**

- This state and national release of up to 17 GL of environmental water will happen now. It is a separate process to the Victorian Environment Assessment Council’s (VEAC) investigation into River Red Gum Forests. The VEAC final report is due at the end of July.
- Four of the eight sites being watered are in Murray River Icon sites: the Mulcra and Lindsay Islands, Wallpolla and Gunbower Wetlands. The amount of water set aside for the autumn environmental watering is a very small proportion of water used in Northern Victoria.
- Victoria has an obligation, under Commonwealth and State law, to protect threatened species within its borders.
- Threatened species in the Murray River Icon sites include the Regent Parrot, the Inland Carpet Python, the Barking Owl, the Painted Snipe, the White-bellied Sea-Eagle and the Growling Grass Frog.
- In the Gunbower Wetlands bird species to benefit from watering the habitat include the Royal Spoonbill, the Great Egret and the Glossy Ibis.