

Country News articles 2021

Updated 4 October 2021

Personalities involved with developing and implementing the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan were interviewed as part of preparing:

30 years done! Creating a resilient Shepparton Irrigation Region 1990 to 2020

Their reflections were captured in Country News articles:

Carl Walters and Kelvin Bruce	28 September 2021
Bill O’Kane	18 May 2021
John Pettigrew	1 June 2021
John Dainton	22 May 2021
30 years done launch feature page	28 September 2021

Their reflections are also part of a [10-minute video](#).

To find out more about 30 years done! or the Goulburn Broken CMA, visit www.gbcma.vic.gov.au
or phone 03 5822 7700.

Partnerships key to success

By Geoff Adams

The threat that salinity could render large areas of the Goulburn Valley a barren landscape was a wake-up call for all community leaders in the 1980s.

Farmers saw the watertable maps showing an alarming rise in water levels and environmentalists were alarmed at the potential damage to ecosystems.

The issue could easily have devolved into blaming, territorial arguments and endless complaints, but the region fought back with a grassroots-driven response supported by inter-agency co-operation, which is not always seen.

Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority sustainable irrigation manager Carl Walters recalls that while everyone talks about "partnerships" in meeting environmental threats, it isn't always evident.

The development of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan has reached its 30th anniversary, and Mr Walters said one of the most important achievements for the plan was the completion of the Muckatah surface water management scheme to address waterlogging, poor stream quality and decaying creek structures.

The 60,000-hectare catchment scheme first attracted 187 objections and required a massive mediation process.

"We eventually came to agreement



Making a difference: Kinnairds Wetland is fed by flows from the Muckatah surface water management scheme.

with everyone, but it required listening and we had to adapt the plan and make changes," Mr Walters said.

"We had to make changes but still try to achieve what we were attempting to do."

Mr Walters said an important lesson from this project was the

community support and buy-in for the scheme.

Shepparton Irrigation Region People and Planning Integration Committee chair Kelvin Bruce also noted the co-operative nature of the achievements.

"While meeting broader needs,

government investment in action has been made locally relevant," Mr Bruce said.

"We have done this by connecting scientists, farmers, bureaucrats, indigenous groups, politicians and other land managers at all scales.

"Community members and



All in this together: Goulburn Broken CMA sustainable irrigation manager Carl Walters says co-operation is key to successful environmental management.



Biting back: Completion of the Mosquito Drain 40 was another significant achievement of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan.

government agency partnerships have been built on trust and an understanding of how to be good partners, often forged in trying circumstances."

● **For more about the plan's anniversary, see page 7 of Country News.**

Plan marks 30 years

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan, and few people are more familiar with it than former Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority chief executive officer Bill O’Kane.

The plan has directed strategic investments across the irrigated landscape of the Goulburn-Broken catchment since its inception.

Mr O’Kane oversaw the implementation of the plan during his 13 years at the helm of Goulburn Broken CMA and is candid about its achievements and where it fell short.

He said the plan was created to manage the rising water-table and salinity.

“We had a real problem in the fruit industry in the ’70s with trees dying due to rising watertables,” Mr O’Kane said.

“Groundwater was rising, productivity was under threat and things were looking pretty grim after a heap of wet years.

“We knew there had to be a greater focus on irrigation water efficiency and a smarter approach to land management.”

Reflecting on three decades of the plan, Mr O’Kane said he was proud to have been involved.

“The community supported it and the departments worked together successfully. I had never seen that happen before,” he said.

“There were bitter feuds between agencies when we started, but Joan Kirner (Victorian Premier from 1990 to 1992) and the government put a stop to all that nonsense by empowering the community.”



Strategic investments . . . Former Goulburn Broken CMA chief executive officer Bill O’Kane reflects on the 30th anniversary of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan.

He said the plan’s greatest strength was its commitment to good science.

“Having that rigour right from the start was key to its success,” he said.

Mr O’Kane said that by its nature the plan was flexible.

“For example, we had to adapt when there was a blue-green algae problem and we worked hard to address that . . .

mind you the drought pretty much fixed that problem for us.

“That flexibility continues now with environmental flows.

“We’re still trying to work out how to minimise damage to the river and achieve what we need downstream.”

Given his time again Mr O’Kane said he would push for a greater focus on equilibrium.

“We needed to do more work

around how far you could push the system without breaking it,” he said.

“We should have introduced the resilience concept earlier.

“Having said that, the plan has achieved plenty.

“Some of those things have happened because of the plan and some in spite of the plan, but overall the outcome has been pretty good from an environmental perspective.”

Right people in right place at right time

Retired orchardist John Pettigrew said there had been many winners from the implementation of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan, but none bigger than the community.

This year marks the 30th continuous year of the SIRLWMP, which has directed strategic investment across the irrigated landscape of the Goulburn Broken catchment since its inception.

"The plan put the Goulburn Valley in a sustainable position when it comes to water management, particularly regarding salinity," Mr Pettigrew said.

"It helped bring the community together, I believe the Community has been the big winner out of this."

The former SPC director said one key to the success of the plan was getting the right people involved from the beginning.

"We were very fortunate to have John Dalton," he said.

"The strong community around him really helped build the groundswell of support we needed to get going."

"He was eager to get environmental people together in one group so they could contribute to the plan — and that was the start of the Goulburn Valley Environment Group in 1989."

Mr Pettigrew said having the right people on board also helped build trust in the plan.

"One of the greatest challenges in the early days was winning the trust of the agencies, farmers, communities and councils."

Mr Pettigrew said in the beginning some farmers were suspicious of the plan's motives.

"It was a struggle because when we identified areas where salinity was a problem, we came up against sensitivity because no-one wanted their farm to be identified as a salinity risk. We had to manage that carefully."

He said over the journey he could only recall a handful of blunders.

"The drainage scheme for the Muckatah



Looking back ... Former SPC director John Pettigrew has reflected on 30 years of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan.

Depression was an issue that comes to mind.

"We thought we had a wonderful plan but there was a lot of pressure from downstream people who were worried about flooding."

"Politically it brought the whole plan to a head and it was a terribly difficult time but I believe we ended up with a much better plan."

"We have definitely made a few mistakes along the way."

"But that's because in many ways we were breaking new ground."

"Fortunately, there were no enormous mistakes and on balance we are on the right side of the ledger."

Former chair says there's still work to be done

John Dainton feels proud when he reflects on the achievements of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan, 30 years on.

This year marks three decades since the plan was established to direct strategic investments across the irrigated landscape of the Goulburn Broken catchment.

"Personally I look back on my long involvement in the plan with a fair bit of pride and it's mainly around the success we had in getting the various departments, groups and landholders to work together," Mr Dainton said.

"When we first started with the plan, we operated like separate silos. Now we look at the whole picture, which is a very different approach from the early days."

Mr Dainton has led a number of industry and natural resource management organisations and has been a driving force in the management of salinity and weed action plans across the region for many years.

"When we first got going it was supposed to be a salinity plan but inevitably the droughts came and the floods came so the plan had to adapt and if it couldn't, it wouldn't work."

The former Goulburn-Murray Water chairman said farmers and the community had gained a lot of knowledge about the importance of conservation through the rollout of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan (SIRLWMP).

"The plan increased the understanding of complex environmental issues. For example farmers now know that drains don't need to be in straight lines but rather meandering loops to help protect the environment."

But he cautioned there was still work to be done.

"Climate change hasn't been addressed properly. Hotter, drier conditions are going to mean a very different future for agriculture and the local economy."

"It doesn't mean we're going to

be worse-off but it does mean we've got to be a lot smarter.

"We can do better. The loss of old trees in the irrigation area is one issue I'd like to see handled better."

When reflecting on his involvement with SIRLWMP, Mr Dainton recalled plenty of argy-bargy with department heads and said he quickly learned to pitch to his audience.

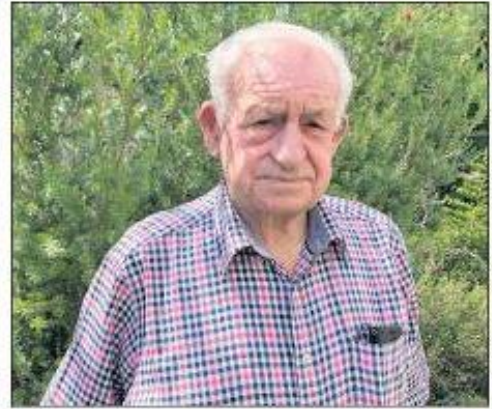
"I remember one day Premier Joan Kirner was coming to talk about the very controversial Girgarre Evaporation Basin.

"The engineer showed me the speech he planned to make. It was boring and technical.

"I advised him to ditch that speech and just talk about how the trees were growing back and the birds were returning.

"He reluctantly took my advice and later Joan Kirner said he was the first person from State Rivers who'd ever made any sense.

"Knowing your audience is terribly important."



Proud ... Former G-MW chair John Dainton reflects on the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan.

“30 years, done!” Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan Achievements 1990 to 2020



Under threat from rising watertables and associated salinity, the Muckatah community drainage committee was formed and within 10 years had developed a model approach in community responses to drainage issues.

The Muckatah Surface Water Management Scheme was built between 1997 and 2020 and includes 60km of primary drain and connecting drains to service the catchment. As well as protecting agricultural land, the scheme helps to protect 2295 hectares of remnant vegetation and more than 2000 hectares of wetlands.

Shepparton Irrigation Region



John Dainton



Farmer and community leader John Dainton was an early advocate for co-operation between government departments in tackling an emerging salinity issue in the 1980s.

“When we first started with the plan, we operated like separate silos. Now we look at the whole picture, which is a very different approach from the early days,” he said.

“When we first got going it was supposed to be a salinity plan but inevitably the droughts came and the floods came so the plan had to adapt and if it couldn’t, it wouldn’t work.”

Mr Dainton said farmers and the community had gained a lot of knowledge about the importance of conservation through the rollout of the plan.

But he said there was still work to be done.

“Climate change hasn’t been addressed properly. Hotter, drier conditions are going to mean a very different future for agriculture and the local economy. It doesn’t mean we’re going to be worse-off, but it does mean we’ve got to be a lot smarter.”

“We can do better. The loss of old trees in the irrigation area is one issue I’d like to see handled better.”

Allen Canobie



Allen Canobie is driven by two burning desires. He wants to leave his Numurkah property in a better condition than when he bought it.

“And I want our region to remain productive and sustainable into the future,” the semi-retired farmer said.

They’re the reasons he joined the Salinity Program Advisory Council (SPAC) in the late 1980s and became involved in the early development of the plan.

“The plan has led to improved farming techniques, better care for the environment and practices that seem normal now but weren’t even considered back in the late 90s,” Mr Canobie said.

“It was when we started to think about whole farm plans, surface drainage, sub-surface drainage, recycle dams and the conservation of pad dock trees.”

“When I became involved, the main problem was rising watertables and salinity threatening our livelihoods.”

“Then it grew to encompass a whole range of environmental issues as we gradually worked out all the problems were connected.”

Mr Canobie knew it was important that agencies involved in the plan presented a united front.

“It was unique to the plan that the agencies worked together for a common goal.”

An outstanding success

2020-21 marks the 30th anniversary of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan (SIRLWMP)—a plan established to direct strategic investment across the irrigated landscape of the Goulburn Broken catchment.

Shepparton Irrigation Region People and Planning Integration Committee chairman Kelvin Bruce said the plan had been successful because it harnessed the right people and was based on sound science.

“We are proud that our farmers, communities and agencies have worked closely for so long to make large-scale and sensible on-ground changes,” Mr Bruce said.

He said strong and ongoing partnerships had enabled the plan to adapt to changing circumstances.

“The plan’s focus broadened from salinity to include water quality, biodiversity, waterway management, water availability, climate change and community resilience.”

Looking forward to the next 30 years, Mr Bruce said there was plenty still to be achieved.

“Against a backdrop of climate change, we face ongoing challenges to save species and to ensure all our consumptive and environmental water users receive a fair share.”

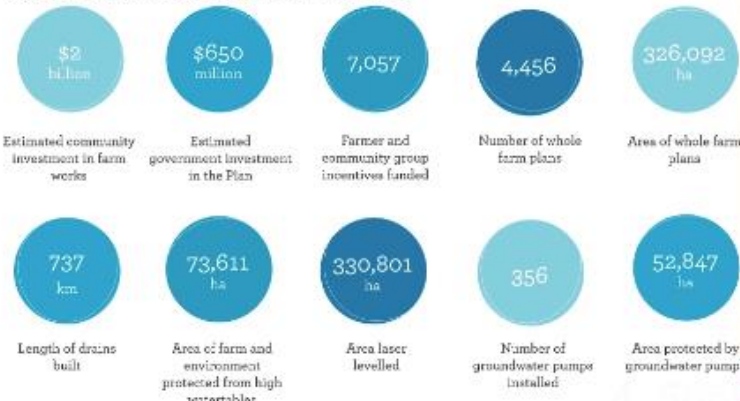
Over the 30 years, government investment of \$650 million was more than matched by farmer and community contributions of \$2 billion to implement more than 300,000 hectares of on-ground actions through 7057 incentives.

Achievements of the plan include:

- 4456 whole farm plans covering 326,092 hectares;
- 81 gigalitres of water saved for agriculture and the environment through farm efficiencies;
- annual salt loads into Murray River reduced by 6500 tonnes;
- annual phosphorus loads from drains into river and streams reduced by over 60 tonnes;
- 737 kilometres of drains built;
- 52,847 hectares protected by groundwater pumps;
- 3567 reuse systems installed;
- 356 groundwater pumps installed;
- 1822 hectares of native vegetation fenced; and
- 2078 hectares planted or direct seeded on private land and 330,801 hectares laser levelled.

30 years of joint action: the numbers

Achievements by farmers, community groups and government agencies working together to implement the plan from 1990 to 2020.



FREE BOOK

Country News, in conjunction with the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, is giving away a limited number of free books telling the story of the Shepparton Irrigation Region Land and Water Management Plan. The book contains stories, anecdotes and photographs as well as a critical evaluation of the progress of land and water issues over the past 30 years.

For your free copy of ‘30 years, done!’ send a note to: 30 years done, Country News, PO Box 204, Shepparton 3630, or email Country News at: edlon@countrynews.com.au with ‘30 Years Done!’ in the subject line. In both cases be sure to include your name and mailing address.

For more information about land and water sustainability in the region, go to: www.gbcm.vic.gov.au

