

# The Wimmera's Flowing Tale

...going with the flow

By the mid-2000s, year after year of below average rainfall from the late 1990s was starting to take a heavy toll on levels in water storages and the Wimmera River. The region was collectively bearing the brunt of the drought with water restrictions and water carting becoming commonplace.

Environmental water releases, while minimal in terms of volume, were able to provide temporary and crucial respite for the stressed river but eventually there was not enough water for even short bursts of environmental water. The section of the Wimmera River classified as 'Heritage River'

between Polkemmet Bridge and Wirrengren Plain north of Lake Albacutya, experienced several years of no flow whatsoever.

**By August 2007, the whole of Victoria was covered by Federal Government drought assistance for the first time in history.**

Water quality issues brought about by the drought dominated our lives. Stories from small towns in the lower river catchment such as Jeparit included community members being forced to gather at the footy club change rooms for daily showers.

## Looking back to 2007

- The region is in its 10th year of drought with water storages languishing below 6% capacity.
- Water for environmental purposes is available in the Wimmera but due to the critical shortage, quantities are minimal.
- Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project construction is underway and regional campaigners and authorities successfully raise the plight of the region's iconic river system state and nation-wide.
- The Wimmera River moves into the next phase of extreme stress with stagnant pools drying up to expose a dry, cracking river bed.
- Community sentiment about regulated environmental water releases is mixed; with so little water available across the region many are concerned about water going to the environment when towns and farms are struggling to survive.

### fast facts

- Regulated environmental water releases provide a lifeline to the Wimmera River system, particularly in the lower reaches near Lake Hindmarsh where water quality issues such as salinity and excess nutrients are more evident.
- Regulated releases are specifically designed to improve the health of the Wimmera River.
- By improving conditions in the river, when floods occur and water overflows from the river into Lake Hindmarsh the bugs and fish are ready and waiting to kick-start the lake's diverse and abundant ecosystem.

A sick and dying Wimmera River near Jeparit by David Fletcher

## Community walks dry and ailing river

The regional picture was bleak but Wimmera people from all walks of life did whatever they could to inspire, motivate and encourage a positive 'can survive and will survive' attitude.

On March 17, 2007 concern for the Wimmera River gained momentum when five people started on a 15-day journey to walk its full length. The Landcare-driven initiative 'Mountains to Mallee' captured widespread attention. The walkers

achieved their goal to raise the profile of the river's plight while sending a positive message from the families who lived along the river and shared the many values it retained even after years of drought.

The moonlit walk across a bone-dry Lake Hindmarsh provided a sombre exclamation mark for what the walkers described as an 'extraordinary journey'.

**Next week: The drought bites hard, then breaks**

## Looking forward to 2022

- Good water quality is taken for granted as the salinity, turbidity and nutrient problems that plagued the catchment in the past slowly abate. Significant landholder participation in erosion control, fencing and revegetation works in the upper catchment is leading to cleaner water reaching the lower Wimmera River north of Horsham.
- Regulated environmental water releases supplement natural passing flows and spills and in drier periods these regulated releases mitigate salinity issues when saline groundwater intrudes into the river channel itself.
- Water in the Wimmera River sustains an abundance and diversity of life and visitors and locals flock to historic river-based community events such as the Horsham Fishing Competition, the Annual Dimboola Rowing Regatta and the Jeparit Fishing Competition.