West Gippsland
Catchment Management Authority

2026-27 SEASONAL WATERING PROPOSAL

Thomson River – *Carran Carran*

West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority



Thomson River

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Acknowledgement of Country

The West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority (WGCMA) would like to acknowledge and pay our respects to the Traditional Landowners and other Indigenous people within the catchment area: the Gunaikurnai people.

We also recognise the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations in land and natural resource management.

1 CONTEXT

This seasonal watering proposal outlines the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority's (WGCMA) proposed watering actions and priorities for use of the *Thomson River environmental entitlement* for the 2026-2027 water year. The Thomson River environmental entitlement is managed on behalf of the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH), by the WGCMA. Development of this proposal is as per the requirements under section 192A of the *Water Act 1989* and is a priority of the West Gippsland Waterway Strategy.

This proposal will be used by the VEWH to inform the development of the state-wide Seasonal Watering Plan. The plan will outline the full scope of state-wide priorities for use of environmental water, including the West Gippsland catchment environmental entitlements. Environmental water in the Latrobe, Thomson and Macalister rivers will be used to protect and enhance the ecological health of their respective waterways. Where applicable, coordinated management of the three river entitlements will also be used to protect and enhance the lower Latrobe wetlands and the Latrobe estuary. The extent to which this is achieved will be governed by the amount of water available and the relevant climatic scenario.

2 SYSTEM OVERVIEW

Carran Carran (Thomson River) flows from the slopes of the Baw Baw Plateau to join *Durt-Yowan* (Latrobe River) south of Sale (Figure 2.3.1). The major tributaries of the Thomson River are the Aberfeldy and Jordan rivers in the upper reaches and *Wirn wirndook Yeerung* (Macalister River) in the lowest reach. Two major structures regulate flow in the Thomson River: Thomson Reservoir — the largest water supply storage for metropolitan Melbourne — and Cowwarr Weir — a regulating structure that supplies irrigation water to parts of the Macalister Irrigation District.

Thomson Reservoir harvests most of the flow from the upper catchment of the Thomson River and significantly affects the flow in all downstream reaches. The Aberfeldy River now provides most of the natural flow variation to the Thomson River below Thomson Reservoir and is essential for providing natural freshes and a high flow.

Water for the environment is held in the Thomson Reservoir and released into the river as required. Reach 3 of the Thomson River (from the Aberfeldy River confluence to Cowwarr Weir) is the highest priority for environmental water delivery due to its heritage river status, high-value native streamside vegetation, high-quality in-stream habitat and low abundance of exotic fish species.

At Cowwarr Weir, the Thomson River splits into the old Thomson River course (reach 4a) and Rainbow Creek (reach 4b) (see Figure 1). Passing flows throughout the year are split two-thirds down reach 4a and one-third down reach 4b to avoid impacts to irrigators located on Rainbow Creek. Water for the environment is primarily delivered to the old Thomson River course (reach 4a) to support fish migration, as Cowwarr Weir impedes fish movement through Rainbow Creek.

The Heyfield wetlands are a cluster of pools located between the Thomson River and the township of Heyfield. The construction of levees and weirs along the Thomson River means that river water rarely enters the wetlands. While the largest pool receives stormwater from the Heyfield township, smaller ponds rely on rainfall or pumped water for the environment to maintain environmental values. These values include wetland plant communities planted in recent years as part of a comprehensive revegetation program.

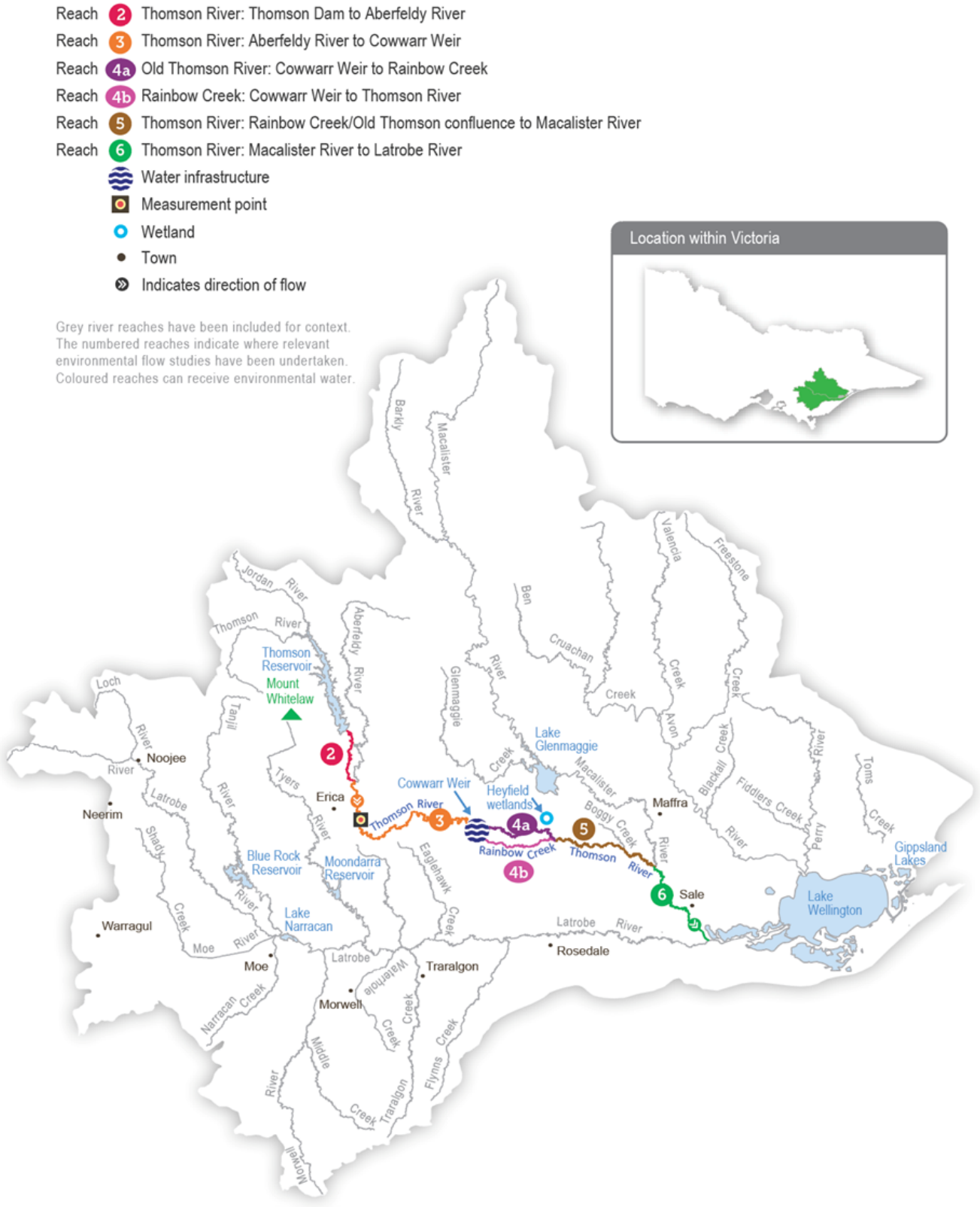


Figure 1 Thomson System Overview

3 ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

The Thomson River supports native species of migratory fish that need to move between the sea and freshwater environments to complete their life cycles, including Australian grayling, tupong, short- and long-finned eel, Australian Bass and Pouched and Shorthead lamprey. A focus for environmental flows management is the Australian grayling, which is a threatened species in Victoria. Australian Graylings spawn in response to autumn freshes, and the larvae and juveniles spend time at sea before returning to the freshwater sections of coastal rivers. A flow that supports key migration periods for Australian grayling also provides spawning and recruitment opportunities that benefit the broader native fish assemblage.

The composition and condition of streamside vegetation vary throughout the Thomson River catchment. The vegetation is intact and in a near-natural condition above Thomson Reservoir in the Baw Baw National Park. Streamside vegetation between Thomson Reservoir and Cowwarr Weir is mostly in good condition but is affected by exotic weeds, including blackberry and gorse. Below the Cowwarr Weir, the vegetation is degraded due to stock access and widespread weed invasion.

The Heyfield wetlands are among the few remaining freshwater wetland sites in the Gippsland Plains landscape. They provide habitat for aquatic and terrestrial animals, including threatened migratory birds that prefer shallow, slow-moving water bodies.

Environmental objectives in the Thomson system	
A1	Maintain existing frog populations and provide suitable habitat for them
 B1	Provide freshwater habitat for migratory and non-migratory wetland birds within the Gippsland Plains landscape
 CN1	Restore carbon and nutrient cycling within Heyfield wetlands to increase ecosystem productivity
F1	Increase the distribution, recruitment and abundance of all native fish, and increase opportunities for the spawning and recruitment of native migratory fish (such as Australian grayling)
 G1	Maintain the physical form of the channel to provide a variety of channel features and habitats for aquatic animals
 G2	Improve river function by maintaining substrate condition and enabling carbon cycling
 MI1	Maintain the natural waterbug community

PR1	Increase the abundance of platypus
V1	Maintain the structural diversity and appropriate distribution (zonation) of streamside vegetation along the riverbank and reduce terrestrial encroachment and invasion in the Thomson River
V2	Increase the recruitment and growth of native in-stream, fringing and streamside vegetation in the Thomson River
V3	Maintain the existing vegetation and promote the growth, establishment and resilience of semi-aquatic species in the Heyfield wetlands
WQ1	Improve water quality in the Thomson River estuary

4 TRADITIONAL OWNER CULTURAL VALUES AND USES

The Gunaikurnai have had a continued connection to Gunaikurnai Country for many thousands of years, including with the waterways in the Latrobe system, into which *Carran Carran* (Thomson River) feeds. For the Gunaikurnai as Traditional Owners, there are immense challenges to heal, protect and manage Country, which has been drastically altered since colonisation.

> "As Gunaikurnai, we see our land (*Wurruk*), waters (*Yarnda*), air (*Watpootjan*) and every living thing as one. All things come from *Wurruk*, *Yarnda* and *Watpootjan*, and they are the spiritual life-giving resources, providing us with resources and forming the basis of our cultural practices. We have a cultural responsibility to ensure that all of it is looked after."

– Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap 2022 – Gunaikurnai Nation Statement

Traditionally, *Carran Carran* was an important meeting place and a place to camp. Today, most of *Carran Carran* is inaccessible to the Gunaikurnai, making it difficult to meet and yarn along the river.

The Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) has worked with West Gippsland CMA on how to express Gunaikurnai objectives for *Carran Carran*, including through participation in a flows study.

GLaWAC Cultural Water Officers have undertaken many Aboriginal Waterways Assessments on *Carran Carran* with Gunaikurnai Community members, and GLaWAC continues to assess how to protect and further the river's cultural values and uses.

Assessments for watering requirements of *Carran Carran* for the Gunaikurnai have been based on cultural indicators, including:

- the condition the *Carran Carran* cultural landscape, including the lower Latrobe wetlands and through to the Talikator (Gippsland Lakes)
- the condition and prevalence of plants and animals with cultural values and uses
- cultural species known to be indicators of water quality, water regimes and healthy Country
- observations of water quality.

GLaWAC supports *Carran Carran* environmental watering in 2026-27 that prioritises fish migration, spawning and recruitment, including delivering environmental water to boost regular recruitment, even in drier conditions.

GLaWAC environmental watering requirements to support *Carran Carran* cultural values and uses include:

- Environmental water deliveries planned in partnership with GLaWAC to support a seasonal flow regime to support plants and animals of importance to the Gunaikurnai
- Monitoring including monitoring of cultural indicators, to be seasonal and continuing, to inform the impacts of changed water regimes from water storage dams, urban and mine supply and other uses.
- Water quality that supports the health of native plants and animals with cultural values and uses of significance to the Gunaikurnai.

- Environmental water deliveries being delivered in recognition of how much water is taken from *Carran Carran* for urban and rural uses.

5 SOCIAL RECREATIONAL AND ECONOMIC (SRE) VALUES AND USES

Part 1 – SRE values and uses:

In planning the potential environmental watering actions in Table 2, the West Gippsland CMA considered how environmental flows could support values and uses, including:

- water-based recreation (such as kayaking, canoeing, fishing and swimming)
- riverside recreation and amenity (such as birdwatching, camping, hiking and duck hunting)
- community events and tourism (such as community education, events at the Heyfield wetlands and visitation by locals and non-locals)
- socioeconomic benefits (such as maintaining bankside vegetation and preventing erosion and the potential loss of private and public land).

Planned environmental flows may be modified to align with a community benefit so long as environmental outcomes are not compromised. This is indicated in Table 2.3.1 by an icon, as pictured below and also explained in Figure 1.2.3.

Autumn, winter and spring freshes in the Thomson River create ideal conditions for whitewater rafting, kayaking and canoeing. The timing of environmental flows may be adjusted to optimise opportunities to support these recreation activities, where it does not compromise environmental outcomes. For example, a fresh that aims to cue the migration of Australian grayling and other native fish may be timed to coincide with recreation events or holiday periods when people take advantage of favourable rafting or kayaking conditions.

In addition, kayaking and rafting activities have inherent risks, and large environmental flows are ramped up and down over several days to avoid sudden changes in water levels that may affect river users.

The West Gippsland CMA notifies the public of planned large releases of water for the environment to alert river users about potential increases in the water's level and velocity. People can register on the West Gippsland CMA website to be notified of upcoming watering events.

Part 2 - how 2026-27 PWAs may support SRE values and uses

a)

The WGCMA provides notifications of planned large releases of water for the environment to alert river users about potential increases in the water's level and velocity. People can register on the **West Gippsland CMA website** to be notified of upcoming watering events.

With an increased number of subscribers to the eflow notification list, along with recreational users on the Thomson EWAG, we have found that the number of specific requests for alterations to environmental deliveries has greatly reduced. Groups are now more likely to plan their kayaking trips around environmental flows, particularly the spring fresh in November which we tend to coincide with the Melbourne Cup public holiday. Through the notification system we try to give people plenty of notice, particularly around freshes that may create good kayaking conditions on the River. We also maintain the WGCMA eflow website page to be the most current/up-to-date source of information regarding flows.

b)

Table 1: Shared benefits likely to be supported by Potential Watering Actions in 2026-27

	Environmental watering will also support water sports activities (e.g., canoeing, kayaking, rowing, swimming, water skiing) by increasing river depth and the presence of white water conditions (in upper sections of the River), improving conditions for canoeing and kayaking, improving the water quality in waterholes and increasing longitudinal connectivity of the river.
	Environmental watering will also support waterbird-related recreational activities (e.g., twitching, birdwatching) by providing water bird habitat at Heyfield Wetlands.
	Environmental watering will also support angling activities by encouraging the spawning and recruitment of native fish species.
	Environmental watering will also support peaks in visitation (e.g., camping or other public activities on long weekends or school holidays) adding to the amenity of both river and wetland areas, with improved water quality and river flow.

6 SCOPE OF ENVIRONMENTAL WATERING

The environmental objectives and related flow recommendations used to inform this proposal are detailed in the Thomson River Environmental Flows and Management Review (Streamology, 2020), the Thomson Environmental Water Management Plan (WGCMA, 2023) and in the Heyfield Wetlands Environmental Water requirements report (Boon, 2022), and unless otherwise stated the watering actions evaluated and prioritised in this proposal are consistent with those documents.

The Thomson River itself is viewed as a connected system, from the headwaters in the mountains through to the Gippsland Lakes, and finally into the ocean. The long-term vision for the River is:
A living river, from mountains to sea, that sustains social, cultural and ecological values, contributing to the health and prosperity of the Gippsland lakes and broader region.

Operationally, environmental flows are ordered from Thomson Reservoir to meet volume targets at the Coopers Creek gauge in reach 3 (from Aberfeldy River to Cowwarr Weir) 23 kms downstream of Thomson Reservoir, as this is a compliance point for Melbourne Water. The upper section of reach 6 is also a compliance point for Southern Rural Water (SRW) and is used to assess the continuity of environmental releases down the system.

Flows at Cowwarr Weir can be split between the Thomson River (T4a) and Rainbow Creek (T4b). Unless notified otherwise, passing flows are split 2/3 in the Thomson River channel and 1/3 in Rainbow Creek. Environmental flow releases shall preferentially be passed through the Thomson River channel, except for autumn and spring freshes which will be split as per passing flow arrangements.

The long-term vision for Heyfield Wetlands is:

Provide a watering regime that will ensure Heyfield wetlands is a functional and resilient wetland ecosystem supporting diverse habitat niches and abundant flora and fauna including aquatic, terrestrial and culturally significant species.

Deliveries to Heyfield Wetlands are ordered to meet target volumes at the Coopers Creek gauge in reach 3, as the Melbourne Water compliance point. Water is extracted from the Thomson River via the Gippsland Water raw water pump station at Heyfield. Meter readings are taken at the Rose Street pump by Gippsland Water. Water is delivered to the receiving wetlands via underground pipework.

Table 2 2: Potential Watering Actions in 2026-27

Potential environmental watering action	Expected watering effects	Environmental objectives
Thomson River - reach 3 (compliance point)		
PWA 1 Year-round low flow 125 - 350 ML/d	• Maintain a minimum level of habitat and maintain water quality and temperature in pools and riffles for waterbugs and fish (at 125 ML/d). • Maintain sufficient water depth to facilitate platypus and fish movement between localised habitats and increase foraging opportunities (at 125 ML/d). • At the 350 ML/d, the flow provides greater longitudinal connectivity supporting large scale native fish movement over autumn-spring: • connectivity for downstream migration of Australian bass, tupong, lamprey, and Common galaxias) • Providing the upper magnitude also reduces encroachment into the in-stream channel by invasive terrestrial plants • Additional benefits to the Thomson River estuary (reach 6) are expected when provided at 350 ML/d magnitude: • Partially flush the upper water column, helping to sustain waterbug communities and fish by maintaining oxygen levels • Prevent high salinity levels, helping to maintain emergent macrophyte vegetation • Provide freshwater to the lower Latrobe system	 **F1, F2, MI1, PR1, V1, WQ1**
PWA 2 Spring fresh 800-900 ML/d for 5-7 days (Sep-Nov)	• Trigger the migration of adult and juvenile native fish (in particular, the upstream migration of Australian grayling and Australian bass from marine/estuarine habitats) • Improve and maintain streamside vegetation by inundating the benches and providing variable water levels for plant zonation • Carry plant seeds from the upper catchment for deposition downstream • Providing flows that disturb biofilms and scour substrates to maintain in-stream habitat quality for water bugs • Prevent infilling of pools by mobilising fine sediments and depositing them on existing bars and benches to provide substrate for vegetation • Additional benefits to the Thomson River estuary	 **F1, G1, G2, V1, V2, MI1** 

	(reach 6) are expected when provided at 900 ML/d magnitude: • Wet vegetation on higher benches • Partially flush the upper water column, helping to sustain waterbug communities and fish by maintaining oxygen levels • Prevent high salinity levels, helping to maintain emergent macrophyte vegetation • Provide freshwater to the lower Latrobe system	
PWA 3 Summer/autumn freshes 230-350 ML/d, 7 days (Dec-Mar)	• Wet aquatic and fringing vegetation to maintain its condition and support its growth • Wet low-lying benches to prevent encroachment by invasive plants and enable vegetation zonation • Scours substrates to remove accumulated fine sediment and supports native fish movement: • Trigger downstream migration of adult short- and long-finned eel and upstream movement of juvenile Australian bass (Feb-March) • Increase water depth over riffles to facilitate local movement between habitats for large-bodied native fish	 **F1, F2, G1, G2, V2**
PWA 4 Autumn fresh 800 ML/d for 5-7 days (April – May)	• Trigger the migration of adult and juvenile native fish, in particular; • The downstream migration and spawning of adult Australin grayling (April) • The downstream migration of adult tupong (April) and upstream migration of Australian bass (May) • Carry plant seeds and propagules from the upper catchment for deposition downstream and help maintain the zonation of vegetation • Prevent infilling of pools by mobilising fine sediments and depositing them on existing bars and benches to provide substrate for vegetation • Scour substrates to remove accumulated fine sediment	 **F1, F2, V1, V2, G1, G2** 

Heyfield Wetlands		
PWA 5 Fill, up to 10-15ML, max depth ~1.5 m (Aug – Sep)	• Fill ponds to capacity to stabilise the banks and support the spring growth of semi-aquatic vegetation • Provide freshwater habitat for waterbirds and frogs	 **B1, A1, V3, CN1**
PWA 6 Top ups as required to maintain water levels, 5-15 ML Max depth ~1-1.5 m (Oct – May)	• Top-ups ponds before summer to maintain vegetation and enhance recruitment by triggering the release of seeds • Top-up ponds in late summer to ensure the survival of newly planted wetland vegetation • Maintain habitat for waterbirds and frogs • When provided in April-May, top-ups provide drought refuge habitat for waterbirds and frogs following prolonged dry conditions	

PWA 7 Late summer/autumn partial drawdown (average and dry years) (April – May)	• Oxygenate surface soils, break down accumulated organic matter and cycle nutrients • Enhance waterbird food availability by exposing mudflats and providing access to burrowing invertebrates	

7 SCENARIO PLANNING

Seasonal Review (as at 3rd March 2026)

The 2025-26 water year commenced with 967 ML carryover. There were no storage spills from Thomson Dam so all carryover was retained for use throughout the water year. Thomson Dam storage levels have declined since July 2025, with below the 30-year average for inflows over the July-Jan period. At the end of February, storage levels were at 68%. Over the summer irrigation demand was high with SRW drawing on their Thomson account.

To date environmental water deliveries on the Thomson have included a delivery to Heyfield Wetlands (October 2025) and a Spring fresh (November 2025), totalling 5,159 ML delivered. Remaining allocation is currently 10.6 GL, which will allow for delivering the remaining PWAs under the dry to average scenarios. A large rainfall event late in February has provided a top-up to Heyfield Wetlands, so at this stage it is not likely that a follow-up delivery to the site will be required.

The long-range forecast for Feb – April 2026 indicates median to high flow for Thomson Dam inflows, with the forecast not strongly biased toward any one outcome, with a broad range of inflows remaining possible. Climate forecasts for March–May 2026 indicate drier-than-average conditions and low regional streamflow, with climate models pointing to neutral ENSO conditions by late summer.

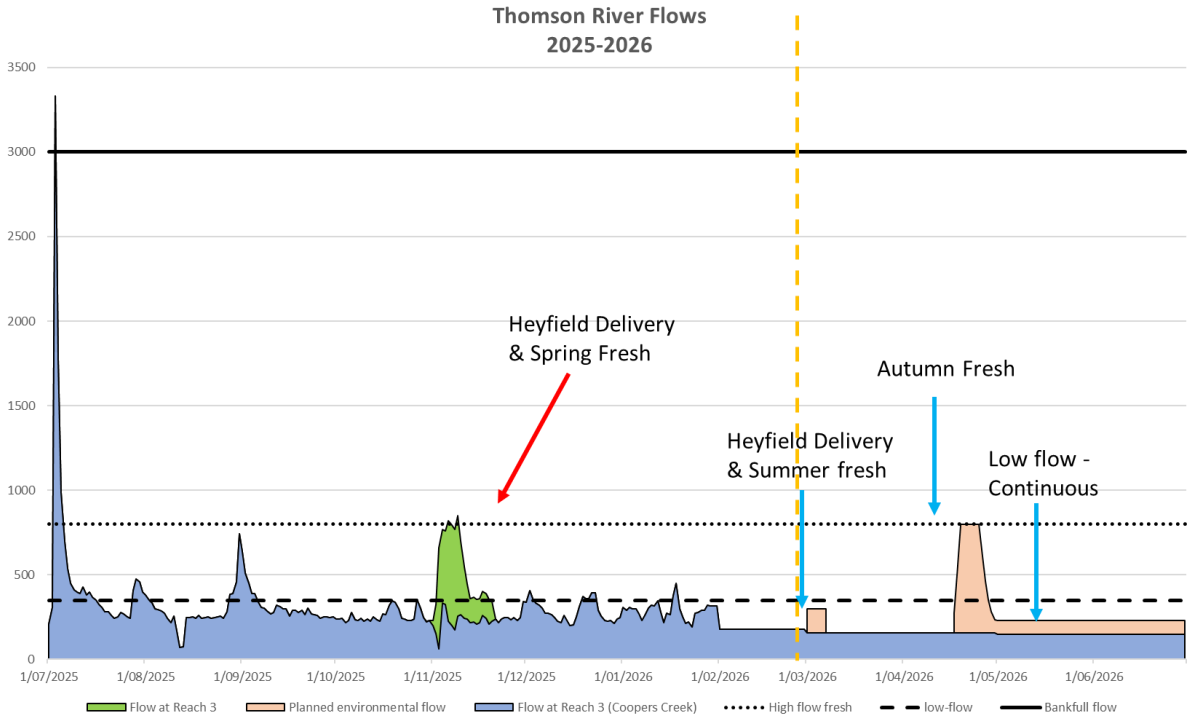


Figure 2 Thomson River 2025-26 Water Year Summary (broken orange lines indicates 3rd March 2026)

Preliminary monitoring results from annual Thomson River fish surveys (February 2026) detected three Australian Grayling, so lower numbers than 2025 (9 detected, including young-of-year) but higher than in 2024 (2 detected), with no young-of-year. Although lower numbers than in previous years (i.e. 2021 – 2024) multiple size classes were observed in Tupong, with age ranges indicating fish of >1 – 2+ years, with no young-of-year. Tupong were once again detected above Horseshoe

Bend tunnel, with this species now consistently captured in this section since the installation of the fishway. Of note, Blackfish size class ranges indicate several recruitment events over the past few years, including young-of-year. Monitoring as part of the Native Fish Report Card program also noted extremely high abundances of European Carp at the lowest three sites (on the Thomson River), with >500 recorded at a single site.

As in previous years, flow prioritisation for 2026-27 is focused around providing opportunities for migration, recruitment, spawning and survival of previous years recruits to improve native fish populations in the Thomson River and broader Lake Wellington catchment.

Native fish in the Thomson system require baseflows for habitat connectivity and local movement, and freshes as triggers to promote spawning and recruitment in migratory species. Outside of very wet seasons, these flow events have a lower probability of being fully provided naturally, and as such represent the highest priority watering actions across all management scenarios for the Thomson River in 2026-27.

Part 1 – expected conditions and prioritisation:

For any given year the level at which an objective can be met will vary depending on the extant weather and climate conditions. For this reason, the overarching goals for environmental water management varies over four climatic scenarios. These goals are as follows:

- Drought — **Protect** high priority environmental assets, key functions, and priority refuges to ensure chance of future recovery and avoid catastrophic events such as low dissolved oxygen or algal blooms
- Dry — **Maintain** high priority environmental assets, key functions, and priority refuges to ensure chance of future recovery and avoid catastrophic events such as low dissolved oxygen or algal blooms
- Average — **Recover** by improving ecological health and resilience and enhance recruitment opportunities for key flora and fauna
- Wet — **Enhance** by maximising recruitment opportunities for flora and fauna species.

Proposed watering actions for the Thomson River and Heyfield Wetlands in 2026-27 have been detailed in Table 2 and 3, based on the recent historical streamflow, latest known condition of target ecological values, the likelihood of achieving the ecological objectives and the potential for the watering action to be provided by other water sources (e.g., unregulated flows, consumptive water delivery, etc).

Table 3: Scenario Planning in 2026-27

Planning scenario	Drought	Dry	Average	Wet
Expected conditions	• Reservoir spilling unlikely • Passing flows delivered at Coopers Creek as per the BE for all months • Reduced passing flows at Wandocka (50 ML/d or higher) • No unregulated flows expected	• Reservoir spilling unlikely • Passing flows delivered at Coopers Creek as per the BE for all months • Reduced passing flows at Wandocka (50 ML/d or higher) • Some unregulated flows from tributaries potentially contributing to baseflows and freshes	• Reservoir spilling unlikely • Passing flows delivered at Coopers Creek as per the BE for all months • Unregulated flows from tributaries likely to contribute to baseflows and freshes	• Reservoir spilling possible • Passing flows delivered at Coopers Creek as per the BE for all months • Unregulated flows from tributaries highly likely to contribute to baseflows and freshes
Expected availability of water for the environment	15.1 GL	17.2 GL	19.4 GL	24.5 GL
Estimated Carryover (as at 3/03/2026)*	1.6 GL	1.6 GL	1.6 GL	1.6 GL
Thomson River – Reach 3				
Potential environmental watering – tier 1 (high priorities)	• **PWA 1** Year-round low flow 125 – 350 ML/d • **PWA 2** Spring fresh, 800 ML/d, 5 days • **PWA 3** 2 x Summer/autumn freshes, 230-350 ML/d • **PWA 4** Autumn fresh,800 ML/d, 5 days	• **PWA 1** Year-round low flow 125 – 350 ML/d • **PWA 2** Spring fresh, 800 ML/d, 7 days • **PWA 3** 2-3 x 230 ML/d Summer/autumn freshes • **PWA 4** Autumn fresh,800 ML/d, 7 days	• **PWA 1** Year-round low flow 125 – 350 ML/d • **PWA 2** Spring fresh, 800 ML/d, 7 days • **PWA 3 2** x 300 ML/d Summer/autumn fresh • **PWA 4** Autumn fresh,800 ML/d, 7	• **PWA 1** Year-round low flow 125 – 350 ML/d • **PWA 2** Spring fresh, 800 ML/d, 7 days • **PWA 3** 2-3 x Summer/autumn freshes, 230-350 ML/d • **PWA 4** Autumn fresh,800 ML/d, 7 days

			days	
Potential environmental watering – tier 2 (additional priorities)				• **PWA 2** Spring fresh, 900 ML/d, 7 days
Heyfield Wetlands – reach 3 & 4a				
Potential environmental watering – tier 1 (high priorities)	• **PWA 5** Fill (Aug – Sep) • **PWA 6** Top-ups (Oct – May)	• **PWA 5** Fill (Aug – Sep) • **PWA 6** Top-ups (Oct – May) • **PWA 7** Partial drawdown	• **PWA 5** Fill (Aug – Sep**)** • **PWA 6** Top-ups (Oct – May) • **PWA 7** Partial drawdown	• **PWA 5** Fill (Aug – Sep) • **PWA 6** Top-ups (Oct – May)
Potential environmental watering – tier 2 (additional priorities)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Possible volume of water for the environment required to achieve objectives	• 14.6 GL (Tier 1)	• 17.6 GL (Tier 1)	• 20.2 GL (Tier 1)	• 24.3 GL (Tier 1) • 6.5 GL (Tier 2)

Priority carryover requirements for 2027-28	No priority carryover requirements for 2027-28

Part 2 - Scenario planning logic/rationale (descriptive narrative)

The Thomson River experienced dry to average conditions in 2025-26, with only a few short duration rainfall events contributing small freshes in the system in July, September 2025 and late in February 2026. Water for the environment delivered during 2025-26 continued to target flow patterns that provide good conditions for native fish to breed and disperse throughout the system. Planned environmental flows for the Thomson River in 2026-27 will continue to focus on supporting the migration, spawning and recruitment of native fish to further boost their populations.

It is important to deliver a mix of low flows and freshes throughout the year in the Thomson River, but the magnitude, duration and frequency of these events will generally be lower in the drought and dry planning scenarios than in the average and wet planning scenarios. More events with higher magnitude and longer duration may be delivered in all planning scenarios if enough water is available. As seen in recent years, natural tributary inflows will likely achieve many of the planned watering actions in the wetter planning scenarios.

The highest-priority potential watering actions for the Thomson River are 800 ML per day freshes in autumn (in April/May) and spring (in September/November) to support migratory fish to move into or out of the system. These events are essential to cue the spawning and recruitment of the threatened Australian grayling population and other native migratory fish species, which have had high recruitment in recent years. These events are necessary yearly in the average and wet planning scenarios to ensure regular recruitment and align with environmental cues in the broader landscape. In the dry and drought planning scenarios, low flows are generally prioritised over freshes to maintain fish populations, but these events are important to deliver even in drier conditions in 2026-27 to consolidate recent population growth. And, given the 2–5-year life cycles of most of the species we target in the Thomson, it is important not to have consecutive years of little to no recruitment. Where possible, the spring and autumn freshes may be timed to coincide with long weekends to provide additional recreational benefits for river users. Delivering two summer/autumn freshes is a high priority in all planning scenarios to clear fine silt and biofilms from in-stream habitat and facilitate the movement of native fish and platypus.

Delivery of a low flow throughout the year is expected to change depending on the planning scenario. A 125 ML per day flow in reach 3 is the minimum target magnitude through summer and autumn, which is expected to be delivered with the operational passing flows. Increasing the low-flow magnitude to at least 230 ML per day between May and July and 350 ML per day in November (following a spring fresh) is recommended in all planning scenarios to improve water quality in the Thomson estuary. The upper magnitude of 350 ML per day during May to July is preferred in all planning scenarios to improve outcomes for fringing and streamside vegetation. However, the magnitude of the low flow throughout these months may be reduced to 230-300 ML per day in drier planning scenarios, which is still at a rate that allows fish and platypus to move throughout the reach at critical breeding and dispersal times.

The recommended water regime for the Heyfield wetlands is the same in the dry and average planning scenarios because the wetlands are expected to hold water for most of the year in these planning scenarios. Filling the wetlands in late winter or early spring and providing top-ups through summer and early autumn aims to help recently planted semi-aquatic and terrestrial fringing plants become established and promote the natural recruitment of native wetland species. A partial drawdown in mid-to-late autumn in the dry and average planning scenarios will replicate a natural

drying event and allow the breakdown of accumulated organic matter, promote nutrient cycling and provide mudflat habitats for waterbirds to feed. In the wet planning scenario, natural inflow is expected to keep the wetlands near full, so a partial drawdown will not be possible. The planned autumn drawdown will be replaced by ongoing top-ups in the drought planning scenario to maintain some aquatic habitat for frogs and waterbirds in the local area. In the average and wet planning scenarios, natural run-off will likely meet some or all of the recommended watering actions at the Heyfield wetlands.

There are no carryover targets in the Thomson system for 2026-27. A combination of natural inflows and environmental water deliveries are expected to meet many of the planned watering actions in the Thomson River in 2026-27, meaning enough water for the environment will likely be available to meet early-season demands in 2027-28.

8 ENGAGEMENT

Narrative

Engagement during the past 12 months

Much of the Thomson River engagement this past year has centred around celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Thomson Environmental Water Entitlement (August 2025). This has given us an opportunity to connect with stakeholders, both new and existing, as well as raise awareness of the history and importance of environmental water in the broader community. Engagement activities included a webinar, video, infographics and the design of interpretive signage.

As always, continued effort was made to engage with recreational users and the broader community to increase awareness, knowledge and advocacy for environmental water across the region. We have worked to strengthen relationships with kayaking groups via one-on-one communications and targeted social media, to ensure that they take advantage of the shared benefits of freshes, particularly around long-weekends such as Melbourne Cup Day. Several articles were included in the VR Fish newsletters to reach our recreational fishing audience, highlighting the importance of environmental flows for fish spawning and recruitment. A quarterly environmental water newsletter and SMS notification system was also used to share information on planned flows, delivery updates, monitoring results and other news.

Input into the Environmental Water Program

Input that has informed planning and decision making for this proposal was via the Thomson Environmental Water Advisory Group (EWAG). This group is composed of members from government agencies, community, Traditional Owners, and environmental groups, as well as landholders/irrigators, recreational users, and land managers.

Membership of this group originated from the Thomson flows study project advisory group, with subsequent membership coming from an expression of interest process designed to target a diverse range of communities of interest.

The EWAG was invited to two meetings during the year, one of which included a field day. These meetings included an outline of the delivered flows, planned flows, monitoring results as well as climatic conditions. They also included opportunities for members to ask questions, present updates from their communities/groups, and provide feedback on the 2026-27 proposed watering actions. This group also receives emails throughout the year outlining upcoming flows, observations, and any relevant monitoring results that they can share with their representative groups.

Notable feedback

During the EWAG meeting feedback was sought on proposed watering actions for 2026-27.

The proposed watering actions for 2026-27 were supported by the group.

Engagement with Traditional Owners (TO)

The Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) have Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP) status under the Aboriginal Heritage Act (2006) and their area of determination covers all West Gippsland rivers that receive environmental water. The WGCMA has a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in place with GLaWAC since 2013, which includes regular strategic engagement between the WGCMA and GLaWAC. In this MoU the WGCMA agrees to involve the Aboriginal corporation in all WGCMA projects from the beginning as well as build

capacity of GLaWAC to protect and conserve natural resources. Strategic engagement between the WGCMA and GLaWAC does occur regularly.

While a GLaWAC representative was invited to attend both EWAG meetings, they were unable to attend. Therefore, specific engagement occurred separately. WGCMA has worked closely with GLaWAC on our SWPs for several years and have amassed a wealth of cultural knowledge on the river system which will be reviewed along with the proposed flows.
Strategic engagement between the WGCMA and GLaWAC does occur regularly.

WGCMA is working with GLaWAC to coordinate river based eDNA monitoring, looking for sites of shared interest and complementarity. Also looking to contribute funds to GLaWAC's eDNA monitoring program in the region, to increase knowledge sharing and their capacity to participation in waterway management activities.

Summary table

Table 4: Summary of stakeholder engagement that informed this Seasonal Watering Proposal

Stakeholder Category	Stakeholder(s)	Engagement method	Engagement purpose
Community groups and environment groups	• Heyfield Wetlands Committee of Management • VR Fish • Native Fish Australia	• Formal advisory group (Thomson EWAG) • Direct engagement (one-on-one, email distribution list)	• Seek input to the development of the proposal. • Review previous environmental watering actions and seek feedback on any outcomes or observations. • Assist in increasing awareness and understanding of the purpose of objectives of the environmental watering program in the Thomson system. • Provide an opportunity for individuals, agencies and groups to contribute to the proposed watering actions and intended outcomes. • Identify opportunities to achieve shared benefits. • Increase collaboration and awareness of the Thomson catchment.
Government agencies	• Victorian Environmental Water Holder • Melbourne Water • Southern Rural Water • Gippsland Water • Arthur Rylah Institute		
Landholders/farmers	• Thomson river irrigators		
Recreational Users	• Whitehorse canoe club		
Traditional Owners	• Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation	• Review of draft proposal • Direct engagement (one-on-one)	• Invitation to collaborate and share knowledge, • Inform on proposed watering actions, • Identify opportunities to achieve shared benefits.
Local businesses			

9 RISK MANAGEMENT

A risk management workshop was held in February 2026, hosted by the Victorian Environmental Water Holder (VEWH). Workshop participants included representatives from relevant water corporations Melbourne Water, Gippsland Water, land managers, WGCMA and VEWH. A representative from Southern Rural Water was not available on the day. Participants identified the key potential risks that may occur in the 2026-27 water year, to prevent environmental objectives not being met. The risks were considered within the context of the likely watering actions proposed for 2026-27, and the current conditions of environmental assets across each system.

The risk assessment was undertaken using the likelihood, consequence and risk rating tables contained in the updated Victorian Environmental Watering Program Risk Management Framework (updated 2026). The risk assessment process also had regard for dynamic risks that are more likely to vary from year to year, depending on seasonal conditions or the specific watering actions proposed.

Risks and mitigation strategies identified at this workshop have been summarised in the VEWH's 2026 Operational Risk Register for West Gippsland. Many of the risks were categorised as low risks, with the balance rating as medium risks with only one high risk. There were no extreme risks prior to mitigations.

The "high" risk, applicable to all systems, related to safety risk around rapid changes in river conditions due to flow releases. Post mitigation actions (i.e. enacting communications plan, notifications, appropriate ramp up and ramp down rates), the residual risk was identified as low.

The medium and high risks were assessed as having low residual risk levels for 2026-27 following the application of the identified mitigation actions.

10 ENDORSEMENT AND CONSENT

WATERWAY MANAGER APPROVAL OF THE SEASONAL WATERING PROPOSAL

I, the authorised representative of the agency shown below approve the Seasonal Watering Proposal for the Thomson system in 2026-27 and declare that:

- the information provided in this proposal is true and correct,
- all required approvals and endorsements from storage managers, land managers, Traditional Owners or other relevant party have been granted, and
- unless otherwise stated, any consent/s required to use or reproduce Traditional Owner language and knowledge has been obtained.



LF OF WEST GIPPSLAND CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY

resentative:

ntative: Martin Fuller

Position of authorised representative: CEO

Date: 27/04/2026

11 REFERENCES

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