Revitalising Geographe Waterways
End of Program Evaluation

Prepared for the

Vasse Taskforce

Rachel Eberhard and Anna Roberts

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Executive Summary

The Revitalising Geographe Waterways (RGW) project is a four-year (2016-2019) $15 million initiative addressing the management of Geographe catchment and waterways to improve water quality and waterway health. The program has been funded by the Western Australian Government Royalties for Regions with matching funding from partner organisations and additional in-kind. The program has recently been extended for one additional year. This evaluation only considers the initial 2016-2019 program activities.

The overarching aim of the RGW program was:

To improve water quality, waterway health and management of Geographe Waterways, including:

- Clarifying roles and responsibilities of water management organisations;
- Improving community understanding and confidence in water quality management;
- Using science to improve management and measure progress; and
- Engaging the community in waterway management.

The RGW program adopted a collaborative model, led by the Vasse Taskforce (with Ministerial oversight). The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (DWER) has been the lead implementation agency, working with a host of partner agencies, local governments, water managers, industry and community groups. The collaborative approach, between organisations, scientists and the community has been a defining feature.

The evaluation methodology used was adapted from that used to evaluate the Queensland Government's Great Barrier Reef Water Quality Program. The primary information sources include a review of project documents, interviews and focus groups with stakeholders in Busselton and Perth, and an online community survey. These three information sources provided the evidence to assess nine key evaluation questions that related to program appropriateness, impact, effectiveness and legacy. Multiple lines of evidence were used to assess each evaluation question, and results were then aggregated (weighted for quality of evidence) for each criterion. The approach was modified and some questions that proved difficult to assess were dropped from the evaluation[1].

Findings

The RGW Program design documents identified 35 outputs and 17 short-term (four-year) outcomes. The Program has or will deliver all of its planned outputs, with a number of activities exceeding their targets (and the outstanding outputs will be finalised shortly). All of the short-term

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[1] Improved efficiency was not possible to assess within the life of the RGW program and one legacy question was also dropped.

outcomes have been achieved, or partly achieved and program outputs are well aligned to the desired outcomes.

The program achievements documented in this report satisfy the objectives and obligations of the MOU developed for the Royalties for Regions funding agreement.

The RGW program was also evaluated for its appropriateness (fit to need and context), impact (outcomes achieved), effectiveness (delivery of outputs) and legacy (the extent to which impacts will continue after the program ceases).

- Appropriateness: The appropriateness of the RGW program was judged as excellent, having a strong fit to strategies articulated in the foundational documents prepared at the start of the program, delivery contributing to the desired outcomes and demonstrated use of best practice approaches.
- Impact: For its size, the program has had an excellent impact on outcomes, including management practices and water quality, albeit recognising much more work needs to be done to fully realise the benefits of the investment. The collaborative model was seen by stakeholders and the community as the standout feature of the program, engaging agencies, scientists, industry and the community in contributing to the development of better waterway management.
- Effectiveness: The RGW Program has achieved an excellent level of effectiveness. Almost all outputs have been delivered (the balance are expected to be finalised shortly) and a number of areas exceeded output targets (including riparian fencing, soil testing and nutrient mapping, Bay OK demonstration sites, community meetings, fact sheets and other communications).
- Legacy: Legacy refers to the extent to which a program (or project's) impacts will continue over time after funding ceases. Evaluating legacy considers the risks that benefits will not be realised if practices are not sustained and/or responsibilities for ongoing management are not secured. Legacy was assessed as fair. The RGW program has provided a solid foundation for what needs to be a long-term program to improve water quality and maintain or restore waterway health. The Program has made significant advances in underlying science and the development of management plans for water asset managers. There are some outstanding governance issues, particularly maintaining the legacy of the Vasse Taskforce and collaborative governance model, and also resolving responsibility for management of the Ramsar wetlands. There is a clear and reasonable expectation from stakeholders and the community that there will continue to be ongoing investment beyond the life of the current program, and this is required if the legacy benefits of the work undertaken so far are to be fully realised.

The Hart review (2014) made 14 recommendations. Recommendations 1 and 2 related to Program governance. The Vasse Taskforce and DWER have successfully led a collaborative model that has delivered the program, but without enduring governance (and funding) arrangements there is a risk that 'business as usual' will slowly prevail again. The Taskforce has reviewed governance models and recently recommitted to a further 3 years with revised terms of reference and roles and responsibilities. This is a positive step, and we recommend strengthening governance arrangements with longer-term commitments including accountability mechanisms and secure funding arrangements.

Recommendation 3 related to clarifying water asset management responsibilities. The Vasse Taskforce and RGW Program have made significant improvements to water management arrangements, including the development of four management plans. The key outstanding issue in this regard is the long-term leadership of the management of the Ramsar wetlands that is currently under the oversight of a collaborative agency partnership. The resolution of Native Title and transfer of unallocated crown lands to the conservation estate should enable the Department of Biodiversity Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) to step up to a leadership role in this regard. Collaborative arrangements will remain critical for effective and coordinated waterway management.

Seven additional recommendations are addressed or underway, albeit with some minor variations. The remaining four Hart recommendations are more challenging:

- Recommendation 11. Assess the effectiveness of BMPs. While this has been addressed through catchment modelling efforts, we believe this area should continue to be a strong focus of future programs and needs to consider benefits, costs, technical feasibility and, effectiveness of implementation to help guide investments and evaluate outcomes;
- Recommendation 12. Regulate dairy effluent systems and operation. The Government of the day did not support this recommendation so no actions have been taken in this regard. All mature water quality programs in developed economies such as New Zealand, Australia, Europe, the United States have required an underpinning regulatory component because there are limits to what can be expected of voluntary practice adoption. Whilst politically difficult, we see no reason that issues in the Geographe catchment will be any different. We recommend that regulation and compliance of dairy effluent systems and potentially also nutrient management plans for intensive industries such as dairy and horticulture be reconsidered as part of a package of incentives. This would work alongside a voluntary approach and provides a mechanism to ensure compliance of landholders who do not participate voluntarily.
- Recommendation 13. Proposed core funding of $30M over 10 years (baseline $3M pa). This recommendation was not supported by Government. We reiterate that the maintenance of Ramsar values, urban and coastal amenity and the health of Geographe Bay requires sustained investment. We do not know whether this amount of funding is sufficient to achieve outcomes expected by the community. Funding should be based on a robust assessment of benefits and costs to achieve clearly stated outcomes. Based on experience in both the Gippsland Lakes, Victoria and the Great Barrier Reef, Queensland, funding to achieve desired water quality outcomes needs to be carefully assessed.
- Recommendation 14. Consider a range of funding opportunities. While work has been done on funding opportunities it has only achieved a 1-year extension to-date. We highlight the risks that without sufficient, secure ongoing funding further progress and the benefits of the work undertaken to date will not be fully realised.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the RGW Program was appropriate, with an excellent fit to the water quality issues it sought to address and reflecting the foundational documents prepared at the start of the program. The impact of the Program has been excellent, demonstrated by a comprehensive set of Project Closure Reports. We commend the team on their achievements – the project documentation and

program logic provided were the best we have evaluated to date. The highlight of the RGW Program is its collaborative model, which has connected agencies, scientists and the community in common cause to tackle the complex water quality issues of the Geographe catchments. The RGW Program lays a strong foundation for future action and considerable progress has been made on assessing future governance and funding options. It is critical that these are finalised in a timely manner as without long-term governance arrangements and secure funding the benefits of the outcomes achieved may not be fully realised. In the following section we offer a number of recommendations for the next phase of efforts to address water quality and waterway health in this region.

Recommendations

We offer the following eight recommendations to DWER and the Vasse Taskforce for their consideration in forward planning:

Recommendation 1: Resolve long-term governance and funding arrangements.

- Maintain the Vasse Taskforce as the core institutional collaboration, with due Ministerial oversight.
- Facilitate the resolution of the long-term institutional management responsibility for the Ramsar values of the Vasse Wonnerup Wetlands.
- Continue to support the critical role of GeoCatch in engaging rural and urban communities.
- Pursue options identified to secure additional and enduring resourcing.

Recommendation 2: Implement the water asset management plans that have been developed

- Asset managers should progress implementation of water asset management plans.
- Provide regular reports on progress to the Vasse Taskforce and annual updates to the Geographe community.
- Consider and address the resourcing needs for implementation efforts.

Recommendation 3: A more targeted WQIP and business case using economic principles

- The revised WQIP should have fewer and clearer outcomes.
- Use the catchment models and economic analyses to inform priorities.
- Development of the business case should be based on the assessment of benefits and costs to achieve stated outcomes.
- Incorporate climate change and land use change scenarios in catchment modelling.
- Respond to the risks associated with horticultural expansion in the catchment, including development assessment, regulation and other incentives to manage risk.

Recommendation 4: Selection of appropriate mix of policy tools
- Carefully consider the appropriate mix policy tools (extension, incentives, R&D, regulation and informed action) required to achieve change at least cost and to maintain long-term benefits.
- Estimate the effectiveness of BMPs in reducing pollutant loads using well established practice adoption theory and principles.
- Short-term incentives tend to be ineffective over time. Progressive implementation of a coherent suite of incentives is preferred.

- Regulatory tools are likely to be an important part of the policy tool mix.
- Carefully maintain close engagement and good working relations with industry partners.

Recommendation 5: Behavioural science to support Program implementation

- Make more use of social and institutional science as well as economic theory to help develop realistic targets, prioritise actions, support implementation and evaluate outcomes.

Recommendation 6: Appropriate science, monitoring, modelling, evaluation and reporting

- Review the current science plan in line with the revised WQIP and funding commitments.
- We suggest that:
    - Monitoring will need to be rationalised;
    - Modelling capacity that can continue to inform management decisions should be maintained;
    - There is an ongoing need to grow ecological understanding of VWW ecological responses to water levels and quality; and
    - There is clearly a need for additional science related to the evaluation of agricultural BMPs and adoption incentives, i.e. behavioural sciences and economics.
- We recommend that the Taskforce consider developing a simple report card (perhaps 3 yearly) that provides community updates on waterway health and progress towards targets.

Recommendation 7: Extending community engagement with a clearer purpose
- Community education and engagement efforts should be sustained in both urban and rural areas.
- Targets should be set and monitored for penetration of key messages into the wider community.
- GeoCatch should continue to lead this in partnership with other agencies.

Recommendation 8: Improvements in aspects of monitoring and evaluation.

- Carefully consider key evaluation questions at the start of the next program and ensuring consistency with the National Natural Resource Management (NRM) MERI framework (Australian Government, 2009).
- Determine efficiency benchmarks at the start of the next program to ensure efficiency can be measured and assessed going forward (but noting that practice change efficiencies may well decrease over time as the program seeks to move past 'early adopters').