

Vasse Taskforce

May 2023 | Meeting 27

The twenty-seventh Vasse Taskforce meeting was held in Busselton on 19 May 2023. The Hon. Pierre Yang (MLC) was welcomed by members as incoming Taskforce chair.

1. Incoming Chair

The Hon. Simone McGurk, Minister for Water, appointed Hon. Pierre Yang as the new Taskforce Chair. Mr Yang is Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Training; Water; Youth [New Chair announced for the Vasse Taskforce - RGW \(dwer.wa.gov.au\)](https://dwer.wa.gov.au/news/new-chair-announced-for-the-vasse-taskforce).

Mr Yang is the fifth chair of the Vasse Taskforce. He expressed his appreciation at being invited to chair the group and acknowledged the previous four chairs of the Taskforce (Hon. Mia Davies (MLA), Hon Libby Mettam (MLA), Hon Sally Talbot (MLC), Hon Jackie Jarvis (MLC) for their hard work and commitment to improving water quality and waterway health.

2. 10 Years on

The Taskforce reflected on 10 years of challenges, changes and success since the biggest recorded fish kill in the Vasse Estuary channel was recorded in April 2013. This was a catalyst for an independent review and the Vasse Taskforce was established by government to improve water quality and waterway health. A key criticism by the community was the lack of coordination between state and local government.

Water quality and waterways health is a wicked problem requiring an integrated approach. The Taskforce is successful as each organisation brings its legislation, policies and work programs to the table to gain an integrated insight and outcome.

For 10 years the Taskforce has worked in partnership to reduce nutrient levels in waterways and the incidence of algal blooms and fish kills.

Revitalising Geographe Waterways is a collaborative program of coordinated projects that aims to improve water quality, waterway health and management of Geographe waterways. The program is delivered through an innovative combination of science, management, on-ground works and partnerships.

Revitalising Geographe
Waterways

VASSE
taskFORCE

During this period it has been the driving force behind *Revitalising Geographe Waterways*, providing direction and oversight of the program, providing support to designated waterway managers and reporting to the community on outcomes of activities undertaken to improve waterways health and future management of the assets.

An independent evaluation of *Revitalising Geographe Waterways* highlighted the governance arrangement and its collaborative model, has connected agencies, scientists and the community in common cause to tackle the complex water quality issues of the Geographe catchments.

The Vasse Wonnerup wetland Partnership (the Partnership) is composed of five agencies (Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (Chair), Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (Fisheries), Water Corporation and City of Busselton). As there is no one organisation responsible for all aspects of management the five agencies have formed the Partnership to ensure an integrated approach to the management of the asset and infrastructure.

From a waterway health perspective, there has been a reduction in harmful phytoplankton concentrations and reduced risk of fish kills in the Vasse Wonnerup wetlands and Toby Inlet over summer months. A 50% reduction in phosphorus nutrient load is being sought and current data shows we have reached 22%.

The Taskforce continues to monitor the waterways and evaluate the effectiveness of its programs.

3. Estuary View Drive sediment removal

The Taskforce noted the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation has twice unsuccessfully advertised a tender to undertake the sediment removal work at Estuary View Drive.

Taskforce partners are in discussion to assess alternatives for removing the sediment and treating the sediment and return water.

4. Lower Vasse River

The Taskforce noted the extensive investigations, evaluation of solutions and works carried out on the Lower Vasse River since early 2000. Work has included:

- Removal of introduced vegetation and replace with native vegetation
- Removal of sediment
- Phoslock and clay trials
- Removal of the butter boards
- City of Busselton taking on responsibility as interim managers of the Lower Vasse River
- Improved management of the river through the development of the Lower Vasse River Water Management Plan (2019) with input from the community

- Enhanced ability to increase flows into the river over winter months through the installation of an additional culvert in the Vasse Diversion Drain as part of the Water Corporation's current upgrade
- Increased understanding of the river and management of algal blooms through additional monitoring and modelling, science investigations on the impacts of Mexican lily, and successful trial of an innovative phosphorus binding clay reducing algal blooms
- Fertiliser management and riparian management projects for farmers in the sub-catchment
- Bay OK urban gardeners project aimed at better managing urban fertiliser use
- upgrading stormwater infrastructure entering the river

Water quality of the Lower Vasse River remains problematic, however a nearly 20% reduction in nutrients entering the Lower Vasse River has been achieved. Monitoring of water quality, including phytoplankton (microscopic algal and bacterial species) in the Lower Vasse River has been undertaken over summer months for the last 20 years. Although water quality has not changed over this time, it has not further deteriorated despite intensification of agriculture and urban expansion.

Two key projects, sediment removal and application of Phoslock will continue in 2023/24.



Early 2000s



Early 2020s

5 Lower Vasse River – dumping of blue dye

The Taskforce was advised by the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation has closed investigations into the dumping of a blue substance into the Lower Vasse River that occurred in March 2023 due to insufficient evidence. If new information becomes available, the department will review it to determine whether any action is appropriate. Information gathered during the investigation suggested that the incident may have been an unauthorised attempt to combat blue-green algae in the river. The Taskforce is taking a collaborative approach to resolve complex problems in the Lower Vasse River and encourages the community to engage with the Taskforce partners.

6 Ecological indicators for the Vasse Wonnerup wetlands

The Taskforce noted the work on the Vasse Wonnerup wetlands Ecological Indicator Program. Indicators are being developed for the Vasse Wonnerup wetlands to communicate the health of the wetlands. Murdoch University have developed indicators specific to the Vasse Wonnerup wetlands for aquatic plants, macroinvertebrate, and Black Bream. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation is developing indicators for water quality which can be standardised across all estuaries as part of the Healthy Estuaries WA program. This may include nitrogen, phosphorus, Chlorophyll A and also address averaging of years. The Department of Biodiversity Conservation and Attractions are also developing indicators for waterbirds.

7 Revitalising Geographe Waterways – planning progress 2025-2029

The Taskforce noted that funding for the current Revitalising Geographe Waterways program would end in December 2024 and that development of the next five-year investment plan was progressing and expected to be completed by the end of 2023.

8 Upcoming engagement activities

Month	Scheduled Engagement Activity	Organiser	Topic
May/June	Community Update	GeoCatch DWER	'10 Years On' Progress since 2013 fish kill
May/June	Soil testing EOIs	GeoCatch	Promote opportunities for farmers to soil test in 2023-24 summer
June/July	Ecological Indicator Launch	DWER	Launch of ecological report cards on RGW website Opportunity for Minister or Taskforce Chair
June	Workshop	Soil Wise and GeoCatch	On-Farm composting workshop
July/September	Report on Activities	DWER	Ministerial/Taskforce Chair launch of RGW Report on Activities 2020-22
July	Bay OK Gardens Workshop	GeoCatch	Composting & soil microbiology at BioSoils premises
July	Workshop	Soil Wise and GeoCatch	Multi-species cropping workshop
October 7	Bay OK Gardens Workshop	GeoCatch	Gardening with Wildflowers with Sabrina Hahn at Busselton Wildflower Festival

More information www.rgw.dwer.wa.gov.au

For more information www.geocatch.asn.au

Fish kills should be reported to the [FishWatch](#) 24-hour hotline on 1800 815 507.