Overview of draft RCS building blocks

What is the RCS and why is it important for the community to get involved?

The RCS is the overarching strategy for land, water and biodiversity management in the region. The CMA prepare the RCS on behalf of partners and community. Involving Traditional Owners, partner organisations and the broader community in the process of RCS development is essential, as each have an important role to play in its implementation. Through engagement for RCS renewal the North Central CMA is seeking to capture regional values and priorities, develop a collective vision, set directions, and outcomes to work towards. The RCS will highlight priorities for investment, describe roles for implementation and highlight opportunities for collaboration across themes and local areas.

Discussion papers

Discussion papers have been drafted for each of the RCS themes; Land, Biodiversity, Water, Community, with a separate paper focused on Traditional Owners of the region. These are working drafts and are being progressively updated as feedback is received. They provide an overview of each theme, discuss the key challenges, review priority assets (where relevant) and outline priority directions and outcomes for consideration. They are being used to frame discussions and provide content for the RCS.

This round of engagement

In this round of engagement, we will focus on the key building blocks of the RCS which are:

- Priority Assets – significant waterways, wetlands and areas of biodiversity highlighted for investment.
- Priority Directions – strategic actions responding to current/emerging threats and opportunities
- Long-term (20+ years) and medium-term (6 years) outcomes – specific measurable targets to improve condition

An overview of each theme, including the key building blocks, is presented in this paper. Full copies of each discussion paper are also provided for reference.

Have your say

We would appreciate your feedback on the key building block outlined in this document and, if you're keen, you can also refer the detail in the discussion papers. Please consider the following questions and submit your feedback via the survey form on the website.

1. Have we described the key issues and challenges for (water/land/biodiversity/community) in the region?
2. Have we captured the most important natural assets (waterways and wetlands/areas of biodiversity value) of the region, in our priority asset list?
3. Do the priority directions cover the important issues for natural resource management in the region?

Land theme

The key issues and challenges include:

- Soil health including; topsoil depletion, soil structure decline and low soil carbon are the key concerns for dryland farming
- Climate change impacts including increased; temperature, seasonal variability, incidence of droughts and floods
- Irrigation modernisation, changing water policy and water trade are causing rapid change to the enterprise mix in irrigation districts.
- Increased mechanisation and global markets are driving; bigger farms, more corporate farms, land use change.
- Farmers capacity to deal with changes and make informed decisions

Priority directions include:

- Deliver participatory programs, in accordance with the principles outlined, that build the capacity of land managers/owners, to improve land health.
- Pilot and deliver a holistic stewardship program underpinned by an accounting framework that outlines key indicators to measure land health, recognising and rewarding land managers as they make improvements.
- Continue to increase the skills and capacity of partners and land managers/owners to improve soil health.
- Develop a comprehensive and accessible soil health knowledge database, to assist the broader community to understand the potential and limitations of soils across the region, updating as needed to capture new knowledge gained through research.
- Communicate geographically referenced land use information to improve understanding of land use and the impacts of land use and system change
- Develop future scenarios for key industries, considering drivers such as climate change, to assist land managers/owners to make informed decisions.
- Continue to improve our collective understanding of the latest evidence-based technologies and systems to provide land managers/owners with relevant and credible information.
- Build stronger connections between on ground research needs and research activity

Draft vision for Land:

Land and soils are managed within their capability to improve the productivity, adaptive capacity and ecological function of agricultural land.

Long-term (20+ years) SMART regional outcome for Land:

- Improved land health considering productivity, adaptive capacity and ecological function, by 2041
- Improved management of irrigation and drainage systems, considering efficiency of water use and opportunities for ecological connectivity, by 2041

Medium-term (6 year) SMART regional outcomes for Land:

- Improve average ground cover to 80% and maintain for 70% of the year to mitigate soil threatening processes by 2027.

- Increase in landholder uptake of improved soil management practices across 600,000 ha, to improve productivity, adaptive capacity and ecological function by 2027.
- Increased participation of new farmers/rural landholders by 600, in participatory programs, to build capacity by 2027.
- Increase uptake of latest technologies and systems on farm by 500,000 ha to improve agricultural productivity, water use efficiency and ecological connectivity by 2027.

Water

The key issues and challenges include:

- Moderate to poor condition of waterways and wetlands
- Increasing competition for less water, including growth in rural residential development and issues with unregulated use
- Polarisation of community around use of water for environment
- Climate change exacerbating threats, including erosion from rainfall events, reduced/changed flow regimes, reduced linkages and habitat availability which are having a serious impact on aquatic ecosystems

Priority assets

The current RCS and North Central Waterway Strategy highlight priority waterway and wetland assets for investment. This priority setting was based on sound information and a rigorous process in which community and partners identified assets and these were assessed considering; environmental significance, threat to asset, feasibility of action, technical and socio-economic risks

For RCS renewal we are reviewing current assets, considering new knowledge, policy and strategy. The current and proposed additional priority water assets for the RCS are shown in the attached map, they include:

- All 2013-19 RCS waterway and wetland assets
- Additional waterway and wetland assets from the North Central Waterway Strategy
- Other assets identified through engagement to date, as described below

The Bendigo Creek has been identified as a priority waterway through consultation with Traditional Owners (Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta) and is the focus of significant work through the Reimagining Bendigo Creek and Wanyarram Dhelk projects. Given the high significance placed on Bendigo Creek by Traditional Owners, it is proposed to be included as a priority RCS asset.

Some initial feedback from Wamba Wemba Traditional Owners is that Lake Boga has significant cultural values. Further discussions with Wamba Wemba will confirm if this is included as a priority in the RCS.

Priority directions include:

Climate Change

- Improve our understanding of the predicted impacts of climate change on water resources and aquatic ecosystems in the region and share this information to inform mitigation and adaptation approaches
- Include consideration of climate change impacts and scenarios in strategic and operational planning for water resources and waterways. Prioritise and implement urgent climate change mitigation and adaptation actions
- Improve current monitoring of water resources and waterways to detect changes due to climate change and enable timely adaptation.

Community

- Deliver an educational program to address polarisation in the community around water, in the context of increasing demands and reduced availability, by improving 'water literacy', including to improve understanding of water for the environment and manage expectations of rural residential landholders.

Recognising and managing for Aboriginal values

- Continue to work with Traditional Owners to understand cultural values and meet their aspirations regarding water management [this action to be discussed and confirmed with TO groups].

Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) and Integrated Water Management (IWM)

- Continue to support the collaborative development and implementation of Integrated Catchment Management and Integrated Water Management projects.

Floodplain management, reconnection and restoration

- Identify priority floodplain connectivity sites and trial management actions to achieve hydrological connectivity and improve ecological function, between wetlands, floodplain streams and major waterways, and within the vicinity of permanent water or drought refuges.
- Avoid, reduce and manage flood risk to community, through continued implementation of the North Central Regional Floodplain Management Strategy 2018-28

Water for the Environment

- Initiate a targeted monitoring program that will inform adaptive management and better tell the story of the environmental and socio-economic outcomes of environmental watering
- Coordinate an integrated approach to the planning and delivery of water for the environment, undertaking complementary works and where possible using consumptive water, to achieve landscape scale outcomes.

Waterway Management

- Maintain and improve the health of priority waterways through continued implementation of the North Central Waterway Strategy 2014-2022, renewing this strategy by 2023.
- Continue to implement Flagship Waterway projects including the mid-Murray Native Fish Recovery project and update the Native Fish Recovery Plan to include Kerang Wetlands Ramsar site and the mid-Loddon, Pennyroyal/Bannacher Creek floodplain.

Vision for Water

Waterways and floodplains will be managed sustainably to protect and enhance their diversity and ecological function while also supporting the regional community's economic, social and cultural benefits

Long-term (20+ years) regional outcomes for Water:

- Improved condition of RCS priority waterways (rivers and wetlands), by 2041
- Improved floodplain connectivity for ecological function, considering social and economic risks to communities, by 2041

Medium-term (6 year) SMART regional outcomes for Water:

- Increase the extent of protected or improved riparian land, on priority RCS waterway assets, by 700km, by 2027
- Improved stream connectivity by 240km and improved instream habitat by 75km by 2027
- Increase protection and improved management of 17,000 ha of priority RCS wetland assets, by 2027
- Deliver on 80% of water for environmental watering actions at planned sites based on the annual Seasonal Water Plans by 2027.

Community

The key issues and challenges include:

- People are continuing to sign up for volunteering programs, but for less time than in the past
- Ageing population, likely to move off farm once over the age of 65, leading to a significant shift in the composition of our regional communities in the next decade
- Climate change impacts and the trend toward larger/corporate farms in the north and west of the region is leading to population decline and associated socio-economic impacts including a reduced volunteer base.
- In the south east of the region there is strong growth in rural residential development - increasing pressure on natural resources and introducing new landholders, some of whom have little knowledge or skills in NRM

Priority directions include:

- Expand our approach to MERI, to better understand and value the; social/cultural outcomes of investment in community based NRM works and consider how to integrate social/cultural objectives in decision making
- Continue to improve our understanding of rural landholders and their communities, across the region and over time, to enable tailored approaches and improved engagement in NRM across a broader demographic
- Community development and capacity building for climate change adaptation considering the varying; impacts across the region, diversity of views, capacity to adapt and the need for locally relevant information to enable informed discussions and how to deal with uncertainty.

- Provide the support that community based NRM groups (including Landcare) need to; maintain group health and membership, adapt to demographic shifts and continue their important role into the future.
- Enable, improve and promote opportunities for communities to connect with nature (including responsible recreational use across the region and around natural assets in urban environments) acknowledging the benefits for community wellbeing, as well as opportunities to deliver community education, link with community-based NRM groups, on-ground works and citizen science.
- Continue to support integrated citizen science programs that engage community and provide useful targeted data to support water, land and biodiversity programs.

Draft vision for Community:

An informed, engaged community active in protecting and enhancing the region's natural assets.

Long-term (20+ years) regional outcome for Community:

- An informed, engaged community active in protecting and enhancing the region's natural assets.

Medium-term (6 year) SMART regional outcomes for Community:

- Improve skills and knowledge to enable practice change through 4000 community members participating in events and programs, by 2027.
- Waterwatch supporting 60 of volunteer citizen scientists to monitor land, water and biodiversity outcomes, by 2027
- Engage a younger and more culturally diverse demographic of event and program participants by 2027.
- Increase the average Landcare / Community NRM Groups Health Score, by 2027.

Biodiversity

The key issues and challenges include:

- Ongoing native vegetation and habitat loss, including of significant native grasslands through land use change
- Condition of native vegetation relatively stable in intact landscapes but declining in fragmented landscapes
- Climate change exacerbating threats, likely to lead to local extinctions
- Connectivity important and needs to be 'climate-wise'

Priority assets:

The current RCS priority biodiversity assets were identified through an extensive engagement process with community and partners, considering significance of values, threats and feasibility to manage. For RCS renewal we are reviewing current assets, considering new knowledge, policy and strategy. The CMA and regional DELWP have worked in partnership to engage partners and community around biodiversity, to align as far as possible, the RCS and regional Biodiversity Response Planning (BRP) priorities.

Considering the original approach to RCS priority setting, we have used the Strategic Biodiversity Values (SBV) mapping to identify areas of high value and cross checking with the Strategic Management Prospects (SMP) with regards relative benefits that could be realised by taking action in those areas.

Proposed updates to the current biodiversity assets have been identified by comparing priority areas suggested through RCS/BRP engagement to date, with SBV and SMP. Where these align and there is a concentration of values either; adjacent to an existing asset or large enough to constitute a new asset, they have been proposed as updates, as shown on the attached map. Some redrawing of boundaries is also proposed. These proposed updates are being shared for discussion. Feedback received will be considered in confirming priority biodiversity assets for the new RCS.

Priority directions include:

- Maintain and enhance the quality of our remnant native vegetation and habitats with a focus on RCS priority biodiversity assets, utilising decision support tools (including Strategic Management Prospects) to maximise benefits
- Build climate-wise connectivity by;
    - promoting a broad strategic approach,
    - enabling and encouraging local investment and action, and
    - leveraging opportunities to improve connectivity
- Establish a regional biodiversity forum for RCS partners, involved in biodiversity planning and management (including Landcare Networks) to;
    - collaborate to proactively address habitat loss,
    - promote collaboration, coordinate effort and share knowledge,
    - explore options to secure sustained investment and develop/maintain a prospectus for non-government investors, and
    - explore opportunities for carbon sequestration to maximise benefits for regional biodiversity.
- Improve the retention and restoration of native vegetation and habitat on private land through; community education and farm planning / stewardship programs and exploring other approaches such as the use of incentives
- Collaborate to understand and respond to climate change impacts on regional biodiversity including, but not limited to;
    - Monitoring species/habitats vulnerable to climate change, and
    - undertaking local testing of climate change adaptation strategies for biodiversity (e.g. using different provinces for revegetation to better match future climates)

Draft Vision for Biodiversity

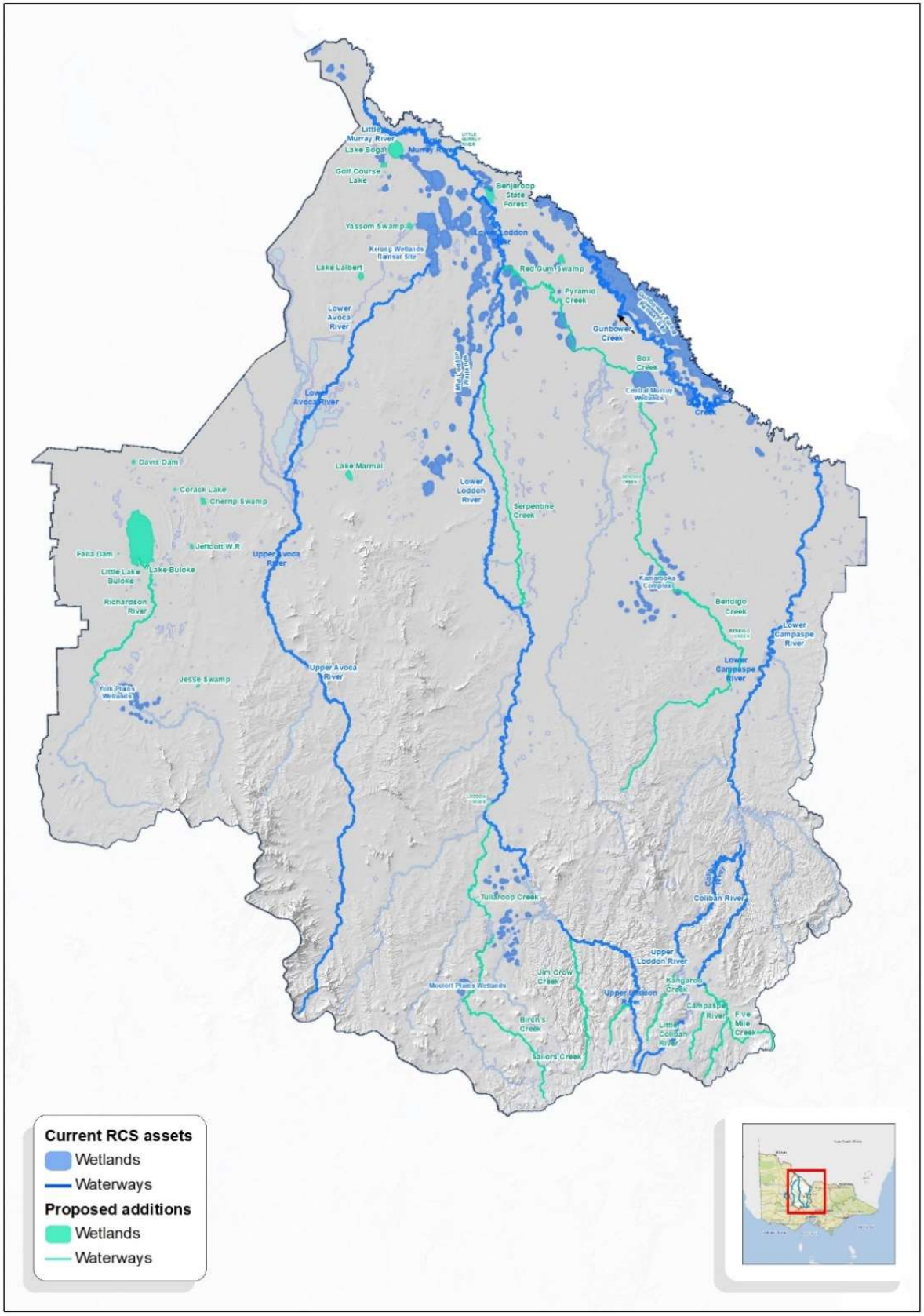
Native vegetation extent and condition is improved across the North Central region. Ecological processes are maintained and enhanced and the present diversity of species and ecological communities and their viability is maintained or increased across each bioregion.

Long-term (20+ years) regional outcome for Community:

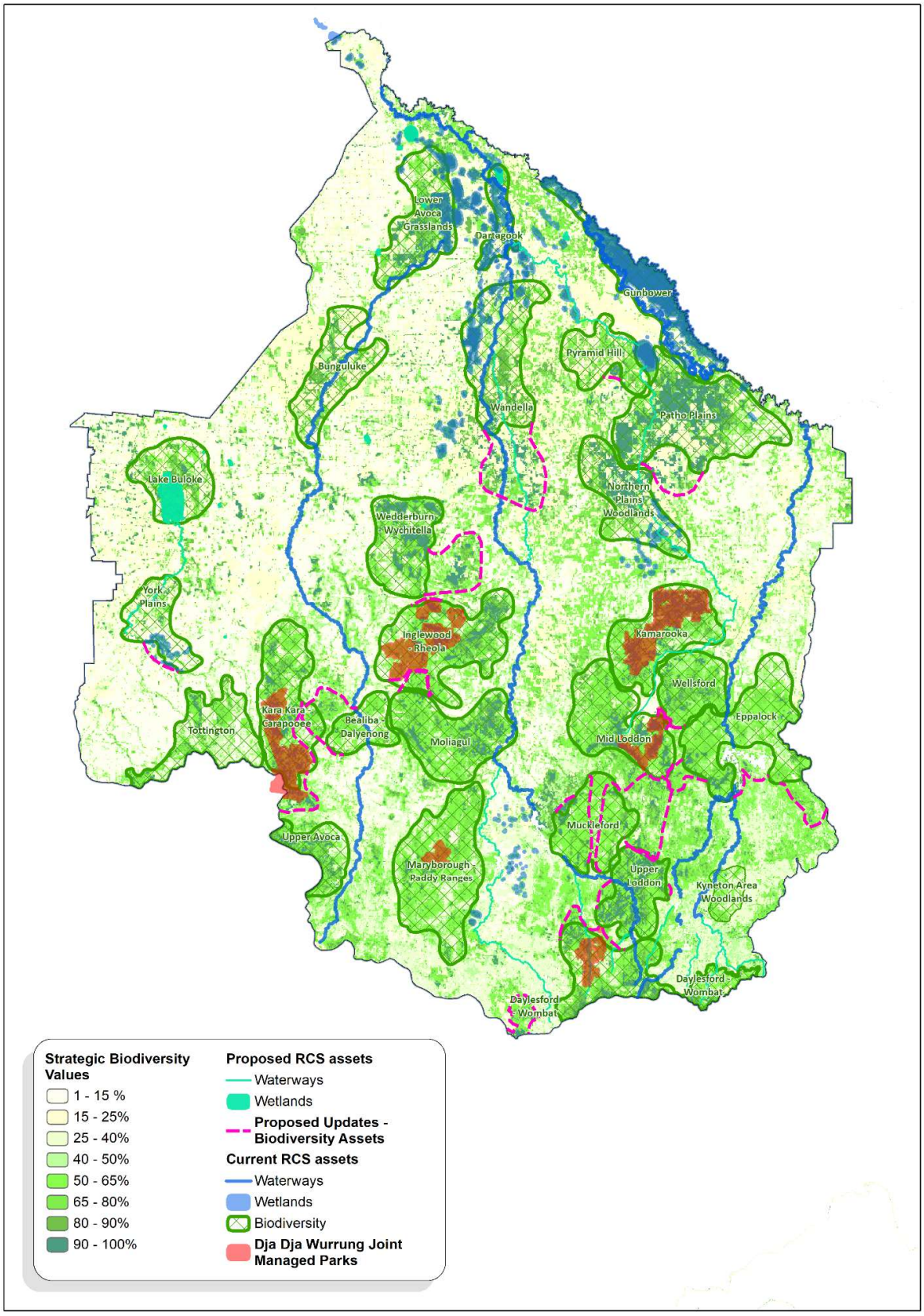
- Long-term (20+ years) SMART regional outcome for biodiversity
- 34,000 ha increase in the area permanently protected by 2037
- 22,000 ha of revegetation in priority locations for habitat connectivity (since 2017)
- 70,000 ha of priority assets under sustained weed control (not year by year cumulative total) by 2027
- 130,000 ha of priority assets under sustained herbivore control (not year by year cumulative total) by 2027
- 40,000 ha of priority assets under sustained pest predator control (not year by year cumulative total) by 2027

Medium-term (6 year) SMART regional outcomes for Community:

- 10,000 ha increase in the area permanently protected by 2027
- 11,000 ha of revegetation in priority locations for habitat connectivity (since 2017)
- 56,000 ha of priority assets under sustained weed control (not year by year cumulative total) by 2027
- 104,000 ha of priority assets under sustained herbivore control (not year by year cumulative total) by 2027
- 32,000 ha of priority assets under sustained pest predator control (not year by year cumulative total) by 2027



Current and proposed additional RCS waterway and wetland assets



Current RCS biodiversity assets and proposed updates