

Allocation of Water for Environmental Purposes

IFA Forestry Policy Statement 5.3

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) advocates managed environmental water allocations from regulated rivers to ensure ongoing health and ecological functioning of riverine systems. Environmental allocations of water should have equal status to water allocations for agricultural, industrial, domestic and social purposes.

The Issue

The ecological health of many riverine ecosystems in Australia has diminished as a result of water extraction and regulation of water flow.

Background

The health and functioning of Australia's rivers, wetlands and riverine vegetation is largely determined by unique water flow and flood regimes. The frequency, duration, timing and amount of flooding are all essential for the regeneration and growth of most floodplain vegetation and to trigger the reproductive cycles for many affected fauna.

Past management of rivers and streams in Australia has focused on the storage, extraction and delivery of water for agricultural, industrial and domestic purposes. Due to these activities there have been changes to the natural flow and flood regimes of rivers, adversely affecting rivers and associated vegetation. Retention or diversion of stream flow impacts the flood regimes, which often causes reduction in the inundation of wetlands (especially when natural regeneration processes occur). Supplying stored water for irrigation reverses the stream flow seasonality and changes water temperature, depth, current and chemistry. These changes can have severe implications on the long-term social and economic values from these environments.

Water is available for environmental purposes to a limited extent from some regulated rivers. Allocations of stored water for environmental purposes are now being established for several of the regulated river systems in the Murray-Darling Basin. The development of the Barwah-Millewa Water Management Strategy in 2000 is another example of a case that recognises the importance of environmental water flows in these forests.

Policy

The IFA supports and encourages:

- Providing water for the environment to sustain and restore ecological processes and the biodiversity of water-dependent ecosystems
- Government programmes to acquire water entitlements within fully allocated catchments to enable the provision of environmental water flows
- Development of water management strategies in management plans for riverine forests
- Ongoing research into the management and impacts of environmental water allocations.

The IFA considers that environmental water allocations should:

- Be recognised as vital to the ongoing health and vitality of riverine ecosystems
- Have equal status to water allocations for agricultural, industrial, domestic and social uses.