

FUTURE OF ORBOST & DISTRICT PROJECT



Media Release – 27th September 2024

Future of Orbost & District Project Water Study Makes Recommendations for Unlocking Irrigation Potential

The findings and recommendations of a water study commissioned by the Future of Orbost and District (FoOD) Project have recently been endorsed by the project's Agriculture Innovation Working Group. The study investigated whether there are economic opportunities available through more efficient utilisation of existing available irrigation water.

The investigation revealed that a significant portion of irrigation water allocated to the Orbost region remains underutilized, even in dry conditions, with several water licenses going unused—often referred to as 'sleeper licences.'

A range of barriers were identified that inhibit more effective water trading in the Orbost district. Key challenges include the lack of transparency around water license holders, restrictive 'no-trading-upstream' regulations, the absence of brokers or trading platforms, and limited awareness or understanding of water trading opportunities and processes.

While many farmers expressed a desire for increased water access to support their production systems, the study also noted a shift among some farmers toward less water-dependent practices. Interestingly, the cost of water was not seen as a significant factor in these decisions, but several farmers did cite the cost of irrigation equipment and electricity for pumping water as barriers.

Liz Mitchell, Chair of the FoOD Governance Group, highlighted the vital link between water access and farm productivity. "Maintaining strong environmental flows in the Snowy River is crucial for its health, however the volume of water available for irrigation is relatively small in our district. It's well established that applying irrigation to land with a water deficit significantly boosts productivity. Therefore, more efficient use of irrigation water holds great potential to enhance on-farm productivity and contribute to our local economy."

The study made several actionable recommendations. These include engaging with regulators and other stakeholders to improve water trading, fostering a stronger collective voice for farmers who rely on irrigation water, exploring strategic options for winter-fill and off-river storage solutions, and supporting agricultural entrepreneurialism.

"There are no quick fixes," Ms Mitchell acknowledged, "but this study provides us with a solid evidence base and a path forward. It will require collaboration between farmers, government bodies, and other stakeholders. Our Agriculture IWG has already developed an action plan to address the recommendations, and we will provide regular updates. We also encourage farmers interested in this issue to connect with the project, and we thank those who contributed valuable input to the study."

The Future of Orbost & District project responds to the challenges posed by the end of native timber harvesting in Victoria's state forests, focusing on transitioning the local economy. Its goal is to build on Orbost and District's existing strengths and leverage opportunities for positive economic, social, and environmental outcomes. The project receives support from the Victorian Government's Forestry Transition Program's Community Stream until September 2025.

The Orbost and District Chamber of Commerce and Industry has an agreement with the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) to deliver the Future of Orbost & District project, which is overseen by a community-led governance group.

The Water Study was undertaken by an independent consultant, with an in-kind contribution from the East Gippsland Shire Council who provided project management support.

END

For more information contact:

Dr Nicola Watts

Future of Orbost & District Project Lead

project@orbostregion.com.au

0408 351 475



<photo supplied