

FUTURE OF ORBOST & DISTRICT PROJECT

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Optimising water availability for agriculture in Orbost & District

The Future of Orbost & District Project is exploring the peaks and troughs of water demand and availability across the district, and why some farmers and landholders are simply not utilising their water entitlements. Optimising water access and security is considered an important opportunity for supporting sustainable growth, innovation, and diversification in the region's significant agriculture sector.

Water licensing has been a topic of discussion at the project's Agriculture Innovation Working Group meetings. Southern Rural Water, which manages the water access arrangements for farmers across the district, advises that no new water licences are available on the Snowy River system. However it has also been highlighted that there may be opportunities to tap into underutilised water allocations.

Orbost and District farmers and landholders are therefore encouraged to participate in a short study to help better understand current and future demand for water, and to uncover whether there are opportunities for water trading in the shorter-term. According to Southern Rural Water, water licences may be transferred permanently or temporarily for up to five years.

Farmer, and member of the Agriculture Innovation Working Group, Chris Nixon says that whilst there are clear regulations around water-trading, there might be some quick wins just through matching farmers who require more water with those that are not using their entitlements. "Often there are misunderstanding around water-trading, however water-trading has the potential to deliver benefits for both parties in the shorter-term", Mr Nixon says. "Very importantly, information from this study will help us explore a range of longer-term options for maximising the water that is available to our district and ensuring that our agriculture sector is sustainable and can continue to contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of our community into the future."

Ms Liz Mitchell, Chair of the Future of Orbost & District Governance Group, says some initial seed funding has been made available to support the study, which will be undertaken by an independent consultant. "It will be great to see local farmers contributing their invaluable experience and local knowledge to the study. Building on their input will enable us to create the smartest plans for moving forward and help understand where potential future funding can be put to best use."

A range of other innovation and diversification opportunities in the district's agriculture sector are being explored by the Agriculture Innovation Working group, and there is an open invitation for interested parties to get involved.

The Future of Orbost & District project is a response to the impacts of the end of native timber harvesting in Victoria's state forests, and the need to transition the local economy. The purpose of the project is to build on to Orbost and District's existing strengths and leverage opportunities for

supporting positive economic, social, and environmental outcomes. The Future of Orbost Project is receiving support through the Victorian Government's Forestry Transition Program's Community Stream through to 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 is being undertaken in partnership with East Gippsland Shire Council.

To get in contact with the project team, email: project@orbostregion.com.au.

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For more information contact:

Dr Nicola Watts

Future of Orbost & District Project Lead

0408 351 475

Mrs Kaylene Wickham

Agribusiness Development Officer

East Gippsland Shire Council

0423 205 007