Hawkesbury Nepean River Health Strategy

The Hawkesbury Nepean River catchment is one of the most environmentally and socially important catchments in NSW. The catchment includes the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage area which protects a huge range of flora and fauna, and is a major destination for recreation and the tourism industry. It provides nearly all the drinking water for the people of the greater Sydney area, and supports an extensive agricultural sector which supplies much of Sydney’s fresh food. It is also home to a variety of mining, manufacturing and processing industries.

These many and varied activities place enormous pressure on the river. Without appropriate management, the health of the catchment could be compromised. The NSW Government has recognised this by putting into place a number of programs to ensure the long-term health of this iconic waterway. The Hawkesbury-Nepean River Health Strategy is an integral part in the puzzle which the NSW Government is constructing to protect the river system, now and into the future. An integrated response is imperative if we are to confront the wide array of complex issues our environment poses. The strategy will provide us with an invaluable ‘tool’ to meet these challenges in an intelligent, empowered and informed manner.

I congratulate the Hawkesbury-Nepean Catchment Management Authority (CMA) for its hard work in developing this strategy. It will play a critical role in delivering many of the objectives of the State Plan. The NSW Government established 13 CMAs across the State in 2003 to ensure the involvement of local people in natural resource decisions. This strategy is another example of that system working.

The protection of our natural resources is a responsibility that we all share and which will only be achieved if a dialogue between all sectors of the community is sustained. The Hawkesbury-Nepean CMA has consulted widely with groups across the catchment in developing this strategy. This includes more than 20 local councils and countless interest groups and individuals from across the catchment. These dedicated people breathe life into the regional model of natural resource management and without them it would not have been achievable.

The result is an extremely sound document which has been built upon the latest science as well as reflecting the wishes and aspirations of the Hawkesbury-Nepean community.

The NSW Government is committed to a vibrant and healthy Hawkesbury-Nepean river system. One which not just sustains livelihoods and lives, but improves the quality of life for the hardworking families who enjoy its wonderful amenity. We will continue to work with the community to ensure that the vision becomes the reality. This strategy will ensure that we are able to achieve this goal for the catchment well into the future.

The Hon Ian Macdonald MLC
Minister for Natural Resources
It is my great pleasure to be able to present the Hawkesbury Nepean River Health Strategy to our catchment community and stakeholders. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the significant natural values and challenges facing the majority of waterways in this catchment of national significance.

This is the first River Health Strategy of its kind in New South Wales and it assesses 255 river reaches and prioritises 3600 kilometres of waterways for restoration actions. The strategy has been developed with input from local communities and focuses specifically on the Hawkesbury Nepean catchment.

The River Health Strategy will complement the 2006 Metropolitan Water Plan and help achieve the natural resource targets set out in the NSW State Plan.

The strategy will also help the Hawkesbury Nepean Catchment Management Authority (HNCMA) identify priority areas for on-ground investment in river health to ensure we maximise environmental outcomes. These priorities will direct our River Health Program informing our ability to identify what works need to be done where. The HNCMA has major projects that will deliver many river health outcomes. The River Restoration Project, for example, works across the catchment with landholders to better manage riverbanks, wetlands and in-stream habitat. The River Health Strategy will also help the HNCMA and our partners to better target investment.

As with all environmental restoration programs, partnerships are key to improving the long-term health of the Hawkesbury Nepean River system. To this end, the HNCMA will be working with State government agencies, local governments, landholders, industry and community groups to carry out the practical on-ground actions identified here and to ensure the investment is protected and enhanced.

Development of this strategy has been a monumental effort, taking the HNCMA over 18 months working with stakeholders to pull all the levels of knowledge and data documented in this strategy. This strategy was undertaken at the request of the Minister for Natural Resources as an additional task reflecting the importance of this catchment and the need to take a whole-of-catchment view to the river system. Since early 2006, the HNCMA has begun to implement the strategy.

This River Health Strategy is a product of a close partnership between the HNCMA and the community. The role of our community experts who bought their impressive local knowledge to the task was an essential ingredient.

These community and technical experts undertook an assessment of the economic, social and environmental values of 150 river reaches in the catchment as well as the threats to those values. Across the catchment, these values vary enormously and the panel process ensured we were able to capture what is important to the local communities and experts for the main river reaches.

This River Health Strategy is linked directly to the HNCMA’s Catchment Action Plan (visit www.hn.cma.nsw.gov.au for a copy) which sets direction for the next 10 years of investment. The Catchment Action Plan will be reviewed annually and as such the actions of this strategy will be kept current and updated.

John Klem
Chair
Hawkesbury Nepean Catchment Management Authority
The rivers of the Hawkesbury Nepean catchment:

• Supply drinking water for over 4 million people living in Sydney, the Illawarra and the Blue Mountains
• Help generate over $1 billion annually in agriculture production (12% of all NSW’s agriculture) including much of Sydney’s fresh vegetables, flowers and fruit.
• Support a $6 million a year commercial fishing industry
• Support 43,000 recreational fishers
• Supply 80% of the sand and gravel used in Sydney’s construction industry worth an estimated $100 million a year
• Attract more than 10 million visitors to the catchment each year generating over $60 million annually in tourism and recreation
• Provide 23% of NSW’s electricity using water from catchment’s rivers
• Supports an extensive underground coal mining industry
• Help sustain the environmental values of the 1 million hectare Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area

Pressures on the rivers of the Hawkesbury Nepean catchment

The rivers and riparian lands of the Hawkesbury Nepean are experiencing significant pressure from urban and rural residential development; extraction of water for metropolitan water supply and agriculture; nutrient input from sewage treatment plants, on-site sewage systems and run-off from agricultural and urban areas; clearing of riparian lands; and altered aquatic habitats that support fewer species. The challenge exists to balance these pressures of development and to protect the environment.

The fact that nearly 50% of the catchment is protected in National Parks and drinking water catchments is providing some protection for key waterways and reduces these pressures in some areas.

But the symptoms of a stressed river system are obvious across the catchment. For example, the largest ever outbreak of Salvinia molesta in temperate Australia occurred on the lower Nepean and Hawkesbury Rivers during the summer of 2003/04. The weed spread across an area of 347 hectares along 88 kilometres of waterways, disrupting economic activity on the river and sparking widespread community concern.

Setting goals for river health

Social and economic development inevitably impacts on natural, ecologically functioning waterways. However, rivers can be ecologically healthy without being pristine. In the Hawkesbury Nepean, river management must integrate the essential economic and social values of its many rivers with strategies and programs that aim to move the condition of waterways towards ecological health.

The Hawkesbury Nepean Catchment Management Authority (HNCMA) has a charter to carry out on-ground actions to meet regionally defined state wide targets contained in the Hawkesbury Nepean Catchment Action Plan. This River Health Strategy provides detailed recommendations and priorities to help meet the targets set in the Catchment Action Plan.
Managing for river health

Four management objectives underpin the River Health Strategy:
1. Maintain the condition of river reaches where they are in natural or near natural condition
2. Maintain and improve river reaches where they are in good condition
3. Improve the environmental condition of the remaining river reaches
4. Achieve the highest environmental and community gain for the resources invested

Assessment of environmental, economic and social values of, and threats to, river reaches across the catchment provides a consistent catchment wide basis for recommending management actions and for setting indicative priorities for investment.

Improved management of riparian lands is a key focus area of the Strategy which has identified that:

• Management of 41 river reaches assessed in the Strategy (a total 631km and 15% of river length) will focus primarily on conservation of remnant riparian vegetation, including the development and implementation of conservation agreements to protect remnant riparian vegetation. These reaches are in relatively good condition.
• Management of 83 river reaches assessed in the Strategy (a total 1384km and 34% of river length) will focus on assisted regeneration of remnant riparian vegetation and management of threats that are still acting to degrade the reaches.
• Management of 48 river reaches assessed in the Strategy (a total of 696km and 17% of river length) will focus on revegetation of riparian lands. These reaches are mostly highly cleared and/or in a quite degraded condition.

Management actions and spatial priorities in eight management themes inform the HNCMA’s strategy for implementation and investment in river health:
• Improving the management of riparian lands
• Managing severe immediate threats and severe downstream impacts
• Managing important wetlands
• Improving aquatic habitat condition and connectivity
• Aquatic weeds management
• Improving management of public recreation on riverbanks
• Supporting the community to take action
• Managing habitat for flagship species