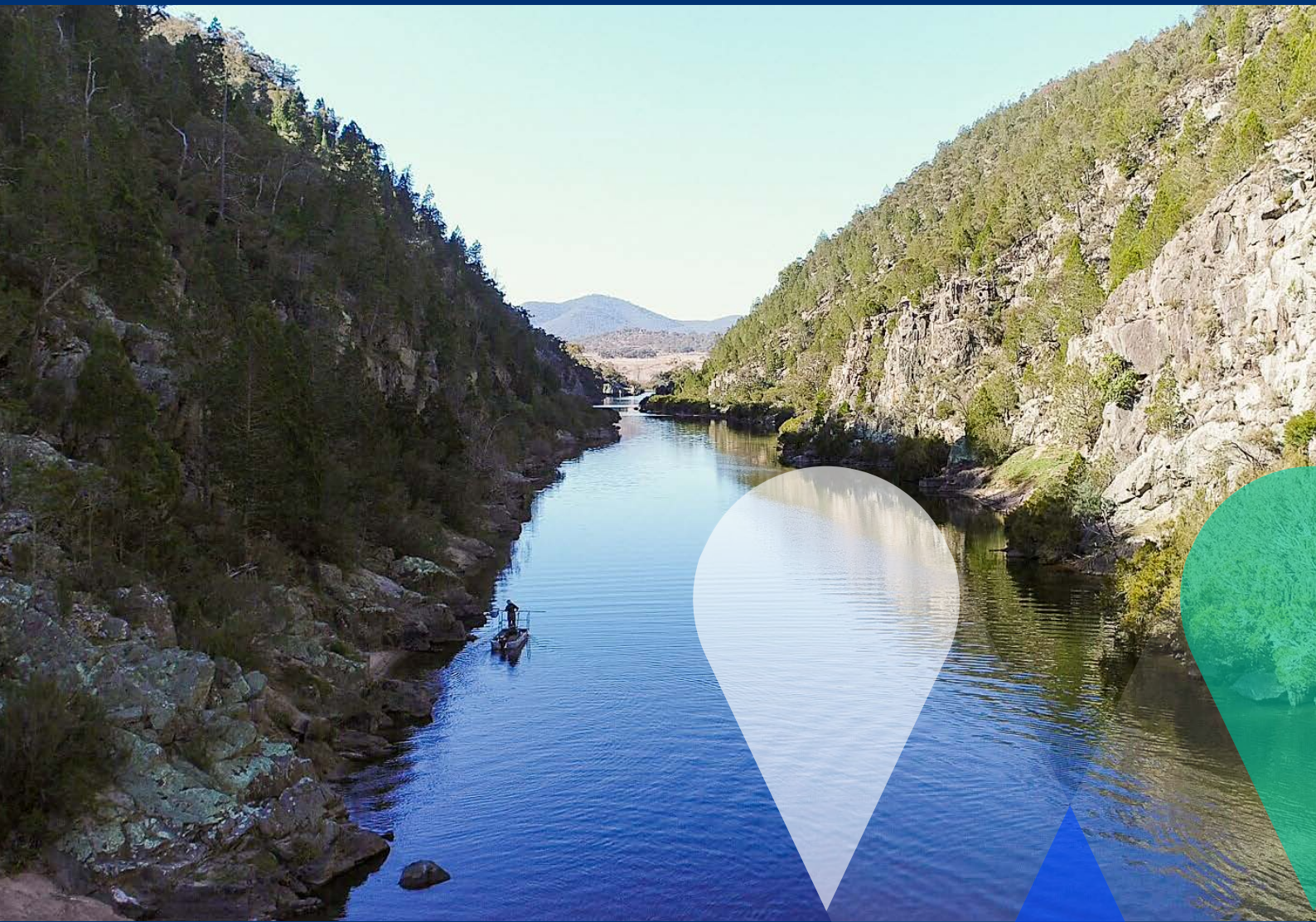


A turning point for the Upper Murrumbidgee and for water nationally

A rare window to move forward



**Watertrust
Australia** Ltd

Acknowledgement of country – Watertrust Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of waters, sea and land throughout Australia and their continuing connection to culture and Country. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Water management decisions are rarely straightforward. Competing needs, historical trade-offs, and shifting community expectations have long made progress difficult. But every now and then, a unique alignment of circumstances creates an opportunity to move forward. Right now, that moment exists for the Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed (SWIOID) review.

For the first time, key stakeholders – including government agencies, industry, environmental interests and community representatives – are finding common ground on the need for a constructive way forward. There is a growing expectation that the review will move ahead and, with strong public interest in water management, there is a clear opportunity for leadership.

The Upper Murrumbidgee is at the heart of a national energy–water–environment debate. With the Tantangara Dam set to play a crucial role in Snowy 2.0, the decisions made here will have lasting implications for both energy security and river health.

A challenge – and an opportunity

The Snowy Scheme captures water in the mountains of southern NSW and sends it westward for irrigation and, in the process, generates electricity. Most of the headwaters of the Snowy and Murrumbidgee rivers are diverted, leaving downstream sections of those rivers running at greatly reduced levels compared with their natural flows.

Public discontent over river health led to the 2002 SWIOID agreement, but it had no provisions for review. When the Upper Murrumbidgee ran dry in 2019, community pressure led to a Commonwealth commitment to re-examine the issue.

A pathway to better water decisions

A strikingly similar challenge was faced by British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority (BC Hydro) in Canada. In the late 1990s, growing conflict over water management led the government to require BC Hydro to re-licence 32 hydro–electric facilities using collaborative processes with the stakeholders involved.

Over five years, they developed and implemented a deliberative decision–aiding process called Structured Decision Making (SDM) that brought together governments, First Nations, regulators, BC Hydro, environmental groups, and communities. These deliberations didn't make hard choices easy but they made them fair, transparent, and defensible.

The result? All but one of the agreements were reached by consensus. Two decades later, they remain in place.



Uncle Wally Bell
Ngunawal Elder and
Traditional Custodian

The river is the lifeblood of our Country. Without the river our Country cannot survive. This has been said by my father and his fathers before him.



Daryl Fields,
Former Board
Member, BC Hydro

SDM was a bold step into the unknown. It increased understanding, found common ground, and transformed our operating environment from conflict to calm.

The groundwork is laid; now it's time to act

Inspired by BC Hydro's success, Watertrust Australia hosted two workshops in 2024 to explore the value of deliberative processes for the Upper Murrumbidgee and the SWIOID review.

The June workshop examined the Canadian experience and its applicability in Australia.

The November workshop stepped through the practicalities of adapting these methods to the SWIOID review with government advisers, community leaders, industry stakeholders, and technical experts.

Participants in these workshops strongly urged quick action to ensure this opportunity is not lost. The Canadian example clearly showed deliberative processes can break deadlocks and deliver workable agreements where previously there had been only conflict.

The enthusiasm from these workshops reinforced one critical message: A quick consultation won't suffice; this process must allow time for deep deliberation if it is to deliver lasting solutions.

Key principles for success

While deliberative processes, like SDM, can and must be adapted to the Australian context, some core principles are critical:

- **Collaborative:** bringing together all interests in the river, including decision-makers, not just a random selection of the population.
- **Deliberative:** a hands-on process where stakeholders actively engage in developing alternatives and assessing trade-offs.
- **Traditional Custodian Leadership:** ensuring early, sustained, and consequential involvement of Traditional Custodians, with co-design as a key principle.
- **Analytical:** complex technical ideas must be translated into decision-relevant information that enables informed participation.
- **Iterative:** learning from each other throughout the process fosters better solutions and stronger consensus.
- **Consensus-seeking:** while consensus is desirable, it is not essential to achieve defensible decisions.
- **Decision-aiding:** these processes support decision-makers, but decision-making authority remains with the government.
- **Influential:** stakeholders must see that their participation genuinely informs government decisions.
- **Commitment to deep deliberation:** true deliberation cannot be rushed – evidence suggests around 18 months is needed for a well-structured process.



**John Rodger,
Chair, Snowy Advisory
Committee**

I arrived at the workshop as a sceptic, expecting a marketing ploy. Instead, I found the fundamentals of this process to be unshakeable.



**Brett Jones,
CEO, Murrumbidgee
Irrigation**

The inclusion of those downstream is essential. I have confidence this deliberative process creates a common understanding and outcome for all.

A breakthrough moment for the SWIOID review

The SWIOID review is a chance to set a new benchmark for water decision-making.

What happens here will not only shape the future of the Upper Murrumbidgee but could influence how water policy is made across Australia.

There is a solution. The Commonwealth is well-placed to enable a process that is inclusive, evidence-based, and designed for long-term success, reinforcing its commitment to responsible water management.

The moment is now. Let's get this right.

Watertrust Australia is committed to supporting a process that unites stakeholders, fosters collaboration, and contributes to a sustainable future for water, benefiting all who depend on it.

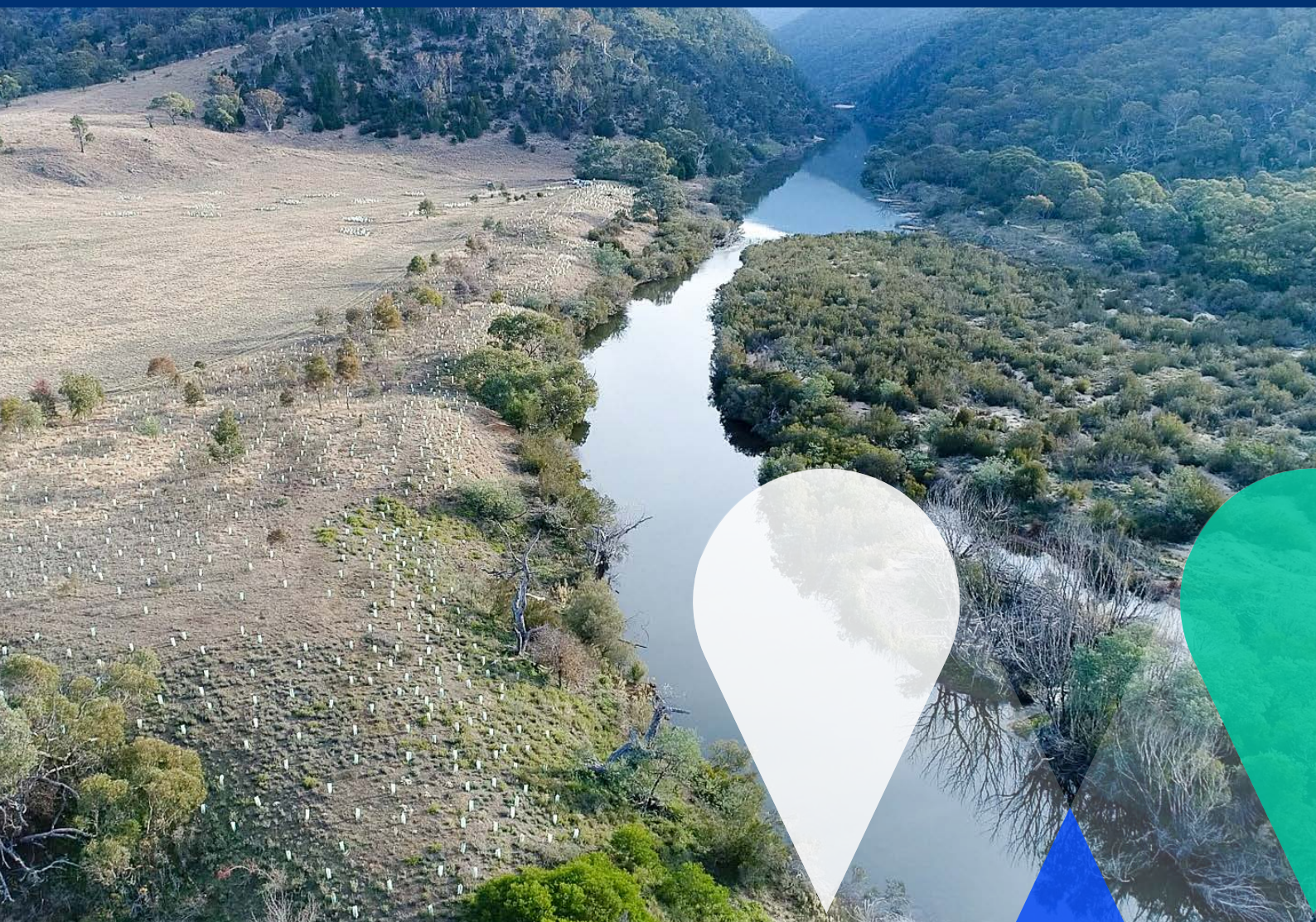
watertrustaustralia.org.au



**Antia Brademann,
Facilitator,
Upper Murrumbidgee
Demonstration Reach**

Communities trust that river management follows the best science. Right now, that's not the case – it must improve.

Cover images provided by Upper Murrumbidgee Demonstration Reach,
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