Watertrust Australia® Ltd

Impact Report

ACCELERATING CHANGE



2025/2026

watertrustaustralia.org.au



Chair's foreword

For five years, Watertrust Australia has positioned itself to work on the nation's toughest water challenges, backed by a coalition of philanthropic funders with a bold ambition to improve how water policy is made on the world's driest inhabited continent.

Looking back over this year, we can see what that ambition has made possible.

On the Upper Murrumbidgee River, the carve-up of finite water resources has split stakeholders for decades. That is where Watertrust has made its biggest breakthrough.

This year, Watertrust completed a deliberative process that brought energy, farming, environmental, utility and community interests together to work through how the health of the river could be improved while recognising the needs of those who depend on it.

And this time, solutions were found. The recommendations that emerged would, if implemented, lift environmental flows from as little as 1 per cent to up to 30 per cent of natural flows over time. There can once again be water to sustain platypus and native fish populations, with no impact on irrigation and only limited impact on Snowy Hydro energy production.

What has been achieved on the Upper Murrumbidgee is significant in its own right, and it has implications that extend well beyond one river.

Watertrust has shown that it can bring together governments and people with deeply different interests, keep them engaged, and help them work through evidence and difficult trade-offs to find a way forward. The involvement of the Commonwealth, NSW and ACT governments demonstrates confidence in Watertrust's independence and its ability to convene around difficult water decisions.

Building on that record, our new Impact Strategy provides a disciplined framework for the future. It will focus Watertrust's resources, relationships and expertise on Australia's hardest water problems, where we can make the greatest impact.



Kathryn Fagg
Watertrust Chair

I am deeply grateful to our philanthropic funders for making Watertrust's work possible, supporting outcomes that were out of reach for government alone. This is hard, important work that underpins the health of our environment, Australia's future food security, and thriving rural communities.

I thank my fellow Board Directors for the experience and commitment they bring to Watertrust, including our most recent appointee, Tiwi and Rembarrnga scientist Kinjia Munkara-Murray. We are grateful for the additional guidance Kinjia brings to Board, as did former Board member Professor Peter Yu AM, a Yawuru man from Broome.

I also extend my thanks to CEO Karen Hutchinson and her team for the care and determination with which they undertake their work, and the many people across governments, communities and the water sector who have agreed to participate and work with us.

Watertrust moves forward with demonstrated results, established relationships and a clear understanding of where it can have enduring impact.

The opportunity for Australia is to build on what Watertrust has demonstrated and apply it to more difficult water decisions across the country.

CEO report

Earlier this year, I was honoured to deliver the Leith Boully Oration.

Leith was a Founding Director of Watertrust Australia. In January 2026, she was posthumously appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for significant service to conservation and the environment.

She set the topic for the oration, focusing on an idea at the heart of difficult water decisions: Does fairness really matter?

This question points to the foundation of Watertrust. We were established by philanthropy to help Australians work together to achieve better, fairer water outcomes. Set up as an impartial organisation with access to the technical skills to make a difference, we support better, fairer water outcomes by providing advice on complex stakeholder discussions; convening respectful and inclusive processes; engaging critical knowledge and expertise; supporting the evaluation of hard trade-offs through structured deliberation; facilitating agreement on preferred or "fair enough" options to provide sound recommendations to government.

In a water landscape where there is increasing demand for water but decreasing supply, agreeing how water is shared, whether through the Basin Plan or local State based allocation plans, is only becoming harder and more contentious.

This is why Watertrust exists, to improve trust in the process and the quality of the outcome. In effect to be a trusted independent broker for better water outcomes.

This year, in addition to our deliberative decision-making project with communities on the Upper Murrumbidgee in NSW and the ACT, and our work in the vast Lower Balonne river system stretching from southern Queensland into northern NSW, in South Australia our team has been working on what bringing a fairness lens to deliberation means for water allocation in the Mt Lofty Ranges.

Understanding fairness, a term that appears along with justice and equity in most water legislation, is an important complement to Watertrust's work as an independent broker.



Karen Hutchinson
Watertrust CEO

Having developed what we believe to be the most comprehensive body of research ever undertaken on fairness in Australian water policy, we are applying this learning in our own deliberative practices, and beginning to work with practitioners and decision-makers across the sector to ensure water decisions take proper account of who benefits and who is asked to bear the cost of change.

First Nations people have too often been excluded from water decisions that affect their Country and communities, and Watertrust is working to change that. We are focused on building relationships with First Nations communities through our project work, with the support of advisors on the ground. Guided by our new Reconciliation Action Plan, we look forward to broadening this work in the year ahead.

I'm proud of our team's progress across every project this year, and the ever-building interest from governments and communities in better ways of reaching decisions about our finite water resources.

Leith asked us the right question. Yes, fairness does matter. And Watertrust is committed to putting people back in the process for fairer, better water outcomes.

Watertrust in 2025-26: An overview

Watertrust is focused on helping Australians work together to achieve better and fairer water outcomes.

This report tells the story of a year in which Watertrust moved from advocating to government about deliberative decision-making processes to being commissioned to deliver those processes on the most sensitive of water issues.

We can point to tangible examples where we are influencing government planning, informing practitioners, and improving the way difficult water decisions are made.

At the Commonwealth level, we successfully demonstrated the power of deliberative decision-making processes and were entrusted to work for government on the Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed (SWIOID) Review.

The process brought together 18 stakeholders with very different positions to deliver a compelling set of recommendations to restore the Upper Murrumbidgee River. Working together, it was possible to put forward solutions that could halt the river's ecological decline resulting from a lack of flows and return up to 30 per cent of natural flows to the river, with only minor impacts on Snowy Hydro energy generation and no unmitigated impacts on irrigation.

People who began with different priorities and, at times, considerable distrust worked through the evidence together and developed recommendations for consideration by the Government's Independent Review Panel. Participants reported that they understood the evidence and one another more clearly, felt their knowledge had been taken seriously, and said they would be willing to work together again.

Across Watertrust's major projects, people with different interests and responsibilities are staying involved because our approach helps them understand the evidence and the perspectives around the table.

In the vast Lower Balonne, Watertrust is bringing together local knowledge and experience, science and modelling for better decision-making in a river system one third the size of Tasmania.

In the Mt Lofty Ranges in South Australia, Watertrust's work on fairness is shaping the design of Water Allocation Plan amendments to help find a better way forward, and lay foundations for challenging processes elsewhere.

Together, these projects demonstrate Watertrust's potential. We work where important water issues remain unresolved, trust is low and established approaches have not made progress.

By creating the conditions in which people can understand the issues, test different options and work through their differences, Watertrust is giving people affected by water policy more reason to trust how decisions are being handled. Good processes can legitimise and de-risk decision-making, helping decision-makers move forward with greater confidence.

Our Impact Strategy and Workplan for 2027-31 will accelerate and expand our impact. It concentrates Watertrust's efforts where conflict, low trust and unresolved policy issues come together, and where working through the decision differently can open new possibilities.



Watertrust highlights



In a major breakthrough for Watertrust, following our demonstration work, the Commonwealth Government chose to try a deliberative decision-making process for the review of the Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed.

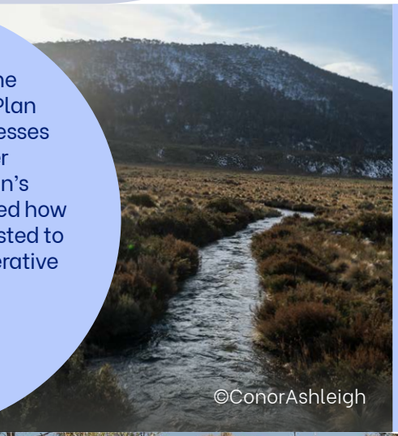
The Watertrust-led process delivered innovative recommendations that could return 30 per cent of natural flows to the Upper Murrumbidgee River, which ran dry in 2019, with only marginal impacts on Snowy Hydro energy production and no unmitigated impacts to irrigation.

The Leith Boully Oration "Does fairness really matter?" built support for making fairness explicit amongst key decision-makers in Australia's water policy space.



MDBA CEO Andrew McConville confirmed the next Basin Plan needs to focus on "place-based solutions" and in an interview with Watertrust Principal Mike Peat, highlighted the importance of an independent honest broker noting this as "the role and strength of Watertrust."

Watertrust called on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review to embed processes for genuine stakeholder engagement in the Plan's legislation and identified how the plan could be adjusted to enable effective deliberative processes.



Our 2027-31 Impact Strategy and Workplan was finalised, committing our team to accelerating and expanding work on the most complex and contested water policy problems in Australia.



Watertrust had a Reconciliation Action Plan approved, and built representation at the project level to put genuine First Nations engagement into action.



Watertrust brought together diverse stakeholders in the vast Lower Balonne to develop a submission to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review, using locally respected experts, accessible science and modelling to find common ground.



In the Mt Lofty Ranges in South Australia, a deliberative approach to Water Allocation Planning has commenced, with initial interviews with stakeholders on what fairness means to them guiding the process design.

Watertrust presented its fairness work to over a hundred practitioners across the Peter Cullen Trust Workshop and the Murray-Darling Basin Leaders Summit to build support for the explicit use of fairness in water policy processes.

CASE STUDY

Upper Murrumbidgee River Initiative – hope for a new future



A river diverted to near-collapse. Eighteen stakeholders with a history of discord. One solution no one thought possible: more than three times the water for the Upper Murrumbidgee, at almost no cost to energy production.

A NEW OUTLOOK FOR THE UPPER MURRUMBIDGEE

Watertrust was engaged by the Commonwealth Government to deliver Australia's first structured decision-making process for water policy on this scale, bringing stakeholders together to work through the crisis facing the Upper Murrumbidgee River.

Over nine months, a group with opposing views and a history of distrust reached broad agreement on 17 recommendations to improve the river's health and management.

Remarkably, the process showed that flows could be increased by up to 30 per cent of natural levels with minimal effect on energy production: roughly 0.05 to 0.1 per cent of total generation in the National Electricity Market.

Reaching this point seemed unlikely only a few years ago.



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DECADES OF DECLINE

Today the Upper Murrumbidgee receives less than 10 per cent of its natural flow and as low as 1 per cent in some years. Most of its water is diverted at Tantangara Dam to Lake Eucumbene before being sent down the Tumut River to support the Snowy Hydro Scheme.

That nation-building project gave agriculture certainty, turned the Riverina into a food bowl and generated electricity for a growing economy. But it also pushed the Upper Murrumbidgee River into sustained ecological decline, with devastating effects on endangered Macquarie perch, Murray cod, trout cod and platypus. The 320-kilometre stretch of river from Tantangara to Burrinjuck Dam can slow to a trickle.

In the summer of 2019-20 the unthinkable happened: the river ran dry. As fires threatened property, wilderness and lives, the community of Tharwa was left without water, and rural firefighters had no water to refill their tankers.

Seeing the river run dry galvanised the community. The Forgotten River campaign, led by community and environmental groups including the Australian Rivers Restoration Centre, pushed for government action. In 2023 the Commonwealth agreed to revisit the Deed between Snowy Hydro and the Commonwealth, NSW and Victorian governments that sets environmental flows for the Snowy and montane rivers.

Reviews like this typically invite submissions and then reach a decision behind closed doors, which undermines transparency and legitimacy.

Watertrust spent 15 months laying the groundwork for a different approach. The process uncovered a solution no one thought possible.

AN AUSTRALIAN-FIRST APPROACH

Watertrust was established through philanthropy in 2021 to find better and fairer solutions to Australia's most difficult water challenges. The review of Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed was our chance to show things could be done differently.

Watertrust had been looking at international approaches to policy deadlocks, including a conflict between electricity generation and environmental outcomes in British Columbia, Canada, that had been resolved using structured decision making.

Unlike linear government processes, this approach brings diverse interests together over time to share perspectives, weigh evidence and learn from one another.

Participants find common ground and reach solutions that, while not perfect, everyone can live with.

Sometimes new solutions emerge. Crucially, the process is transparent, so people can see how and why recommendations are made.

Watertrust made submissions and met with key people in government suggesting a new approach. We held a seminar at the Shine Dome presenting the British Columbia case study and involved key stakeholders, including government, in a six-week Decision Sketch process to demonstrate structured decision making and its potential.

The Commonwealth agreed to try deliberative decision making, the first time it had been used in Australian water policy at this scale, and Watertrust won the tender to deliver it.

APPLYING STRUCTURED DECISION MAKING

The process brought together an 18-member Stakeholder Advisory Group, including senior representatives from Snowy Hydro, the NSW and National Irrigators' Councils, Murrumbidgee irrigators, Snowy Monaro and Queanbeyan-Palerang councils, Icon Water, the Snowy Advisory Committee, experts from ANU and the University of Canberra, environmental groups and community leaders. Technical experts in hydrology, ecology, energy and economics supported the workshops. As part of a separate process, the Government ensured that First Nations groups were consulted, which also fed into the final recommendations.

Over nine months, this disparate group reached broad agreement on 17 recommendations. The recommendations include increasing natural flows up to 30 per cent over time, with minimal impact on energy production and irrigation, along with adaptive management that responds to real-time conditions.

Without a process that let different interests learn from one another, this possibility would likely have stayed hidden behind competing claims.

The Independent Review Panel's draft report reflects the recommendations.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE FUTURE

The process showed that a structured, evidence-based and participatory approach can give policymaking a more informed, transparent and constructive foundation. Those involved say it has changed what they believe is possible in Australian water policy.

The approach has already been recognised. The Independent Review Panel's draft report described the review's iterative approach, in which flow options were refined through repeated rounds of evidence and stakeholder feedback, as a significant strength.

The recommendations are reflected in the Independent Review Panel's draft report. We hope they will be adopted by governments and preserve the Upper Murrumbidgee for years to come.

> "Watertrust's involvement was critical, as without them we would not have had the process we did... The process was a game changer for setting the framework for improving the health of the Upper Murrumbidgee River."
>
> Dr Maxine Cooper, Chair, ACT & Region Catchment Management Coordinator Group.

> "I was sceptical and you've changed my mind on the deliberative process. This is the first time I've seen different stakeholders around the room understand each other's viewpoints." Jenna Bell, Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators and Murrumbidgee Groundwater

CASE STUDY

Lower Balonne Initiative – breaking the deadlock



“Success to me would be to try and get the flows back, the connected flows back, so that we reduce the length of time of no flow. That’s the most critical thing.”

Ed Fessey, floodplain grazier and long-standing water reform advocate, NSW

THE PROBLEM

The Lower Balonne poses one of the most complex challenges in Australian water policy. Unlike other rivers in the Southern Basin, it is an ephemeral river and floodplain network that only flows following significant rain events and experiences long dry spells. It covers around 20,000 square kilometres from southern Queensland into northern New South Wales, and the communities that depend on it feel every shift, from First Nations groups to graziers, irrigators, towns and local councils.

For decades, efforts to balance these needs with the health of the river have struggled, particularly during extended dry periods. Long-running disagreements have eroded trust between different interests and government, and left some groups feeling they have no seat at the table. The river system’s sheer size adds another barrier. People know their own stretch intimately but see little of conditions elsewhere, which makes shared solutions hard to reach.



OUR APPROACH

Watertrust’s Lower Balonne Initiative is working to break the deadlock.

Watertrust assembled a project team combining technical expertise, local knowledge and trusted relationships to work alongside a seven-member Lower Balonne Working Group. This approach is bringing together local knowledge, along with sound science and modelling, to work through practical options for better managing the system.

The first phase of the Initiative was accelerated to ensure locally developed solutions could be submitted to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review.

To help stakeholders build a better understanding of how the river system works, Watertrust created a Lower Balonne Visual Story using video, photography, local voices, technical information and modelling.

Bhiamie Williamson joined the Lower Balonne Initiative as a Cultural Adviser. A Euahlayi man from north-west New South Wales, he comes from a region that includes the Lower Balonne catchment. He is an Associate Professor at Monash University, where he leads the National Indigenous Disaster Resilience Program.

OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

The Working Group turned local knowledge and technical expertise into a submission to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan Review containing nine recommendations that cover temporary and permanent water recovery options. These aim to improve environmental outcomes while also strengthening water security for towns and stock, replenishing cultural sites, and creating new economic opportunities.

The Working Group has also been supported to advocate directly to the Queensland Premier, Treasurer and Water Minister on workable solutions to better manage flow and support native fish populations.

The next stage will broaden participation - including stronger First Nations involvement - building on these nine recommendations, moving from early proposals toward longer-term solutions.

Although there is still work to do, Watertrust’s deliberative approach is clearly working. As an independent broker, Watertrust has been able to convene local interests, share knowledge, and deepen understanding.

Trade-offs are unavoidable, between security and flexibility, between restoring flows and sustaining livelihoods. But people are coming together, trialling solutions, and listening more closely. With respect, transparency, and continued collaboration, better and fairer outcomes are within reach.



CASE STUDY

The Mt Lofty Ranges – a fairer approach to water management



THE PROBLEM

Water Allocation Plans for the Mount Lofty Ranges in South Australia set the rules for how surface water and groundwater are shared, used and managed sustainably. The Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board is commencing a multi-year process to amend the plans in a difficult stakeholder environment.



©The Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board, SA

Previous plans aimed to restore natural flow patterns, particularly the low flows needed to keep water moving through catchments and support the environment. When low-flow devices were not installed on farm dams at the scale expected, more water was allocated than the system could support. This over-allocation left a legacy of distrust, with stakeholders concerned they will be asked to pay for a problem they feel the government created.

Broader pressures include a changing climate, the sustainability of existing allocations, First Nations water interests, forestry, and commercial water management.

> In a real sense, *(the last allocation planning process)* was done to the community, not for or with the community."
>
> Michael Garrod, Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board

OUR APPROACH

Watertrust was engaged while the amendment process was still taking shape, to work with the Landscape Board on stakeholder engagement. It identified the people needing to be heard from across the catchments to capture all perspectives – 33 people from 15 groups were engaged in 17 formal discussions and eight workshops.

Participants included upstream and downstream users, commercial and small-scale water users, primary producers, government and environmental interests. Most stakeholders had never had the opportunity to deeply consider the science and data relevant to water management in their region, or the chance to work with fellow community members to consider the breadth of options available. Rather than running a closed process, we explored differing starting views on the problem and how to develop fair solutions.



©The Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board, SA

OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

The engagement uncovered shared ground across stakeholder groups that conventional engagement would not have revealed, alongside the differences still to be resolved. Most participants recognised water sharing as a whole-of-region problem and wanted clearer information on how much water enters the system, how much is used, and what's needed to maintain a healthy ecosystem.

Despite differences, Watertrust found a willingness to engage with difficult trade-offs, provided people have good information and a genuine opportunity to participate. For the Landscape Board, that means designing a process that is transparent about the consequences of different options and open about how the costs and impacts of change are shared.

Those findings have been translated into practical guidance for the amendment process, including how to build a shared evidence base, involve people more meaningfully and create opportunities to work through competing interests before positions become fixed.

Next year, we will support the Landscape Board to set the objectives for the approach to Water Allocation Planning, and conduct a demonstration project using deliberative processes to unlock a critical impasse involving surface water storage in a region with over 20,000 farm dams.



©The Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board, SA

Fairness Research Program – embedding fairness into water management

The Fairness work is incredible. I have already used some of the information in the Policy Guide to frame my approach in designing an upcoming workshop to make sure fairness is built into the process."

Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board First Nations Engagement Coordinator

Fairness is essential to good water policy, but it is rarely built into how decisions are made. When a process isn't seen as fair, the costs are real: decisions stall, trust erodes, and good policy becomes harder to implement.

Everyone agrees fairness matters, but defining and applying it is difficult. Our analysis of 70 pieces of water legislation found that most jurisdictions mention fairness, justice or equity, yet almost none explain how to apply these ideas in practice.

Watertrust has built a substantial body of research on what fairness means in Australian water policy and how it shapes engagement and decision-making. A structured approach to fairness helps break deadlocks. It brings differing perspectives into the open, supports negotiation of trade-offs, and leads to outcomes more people can accept. It also shows where conflict is greatest, telling us where a deliberative process should begin.

This year we published *Fair Enough: Considering Equity, Fairness and Justice in Water Policy*, which sets out frameworks for making fairness central to water management. We are also building a practice guide and will use it across our own projects to test how well it operationalises fairness.

Translating theory and research into a practical framework that applies at every stage of the policy cycle is no mean feat. We are now testing the framework in real settings with real trade-offs, learning from what works and what doesn't, and capturing those lessons to share with policymakers and communities.

This year we introduced our fairness work to more than 50 practitioners and fellows at the Peter Cullen Trust professional development day, and as a result have an invitation to share it with a much larger audience at the upcoming Victorian Catchment Management Authority Adapt Conference.

Next, we will adapt these tools for wider use. This will give engagement practitioners what they need to navigate difference and reach better water policy outcomes.



Accelerating change: Watertrust's 2027–31 Impact Strategy and Workplan

Watertrust has built significant momentum since developing its Impact Strategy and completing its five-year review.

Progress through the Upper Murrumbidgee initiative, developments in the Lower Balonne, growing interest from the Murray–Darling Basin Authority, and increasing engagement with governments and agencies across the Commonwealth, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and the ACT have strengthened both the opportunity and the imperative for us to accelerate our impact.

These developments give us a clear opportunity over the next three to five years: to build on what we have learned and demonstrated to date, expand our reach, and translate successful place-based work into more enduring change across Australia's water sector.

Horizon 1
FY2027
Accelerate

Leverage early impact wins to accelerate initiative delivery, deepen government engagement, build the future initiative pipeline and strengthen the foundations for scale.

Horizon 2
FY2028 - 2030
Deliver and embed

Scale demonstrated approaches across increasingly complex water challenges, broaden government engagement, build external capability for broader application.

Horizon 3
FY2031 and beyond
Sustain and expand reach

Expand Watertrust's approach, knowledge and capability across the water sector to enable sustained impact and reach beyond Watertrust's direct involvement.

Our ambition is to complete seven to nine place-based deliberative initiatives, with government support, by the end of Horizon 2. Our workplan will focus on complex water management challenges within the Murray–Darling Basin and water allocation planning across Australia, working at the intersection of water policy, planning and practice.

Delivering these initiatives is not, however, the end goal. Our ambition is that by the end of Horizon 2 we have demonstrated that Watertrust's approach can create enduring impact – generating practical solutions to complex water challenges while strengthening the relationships, capability and ways of working needed to sustain change beyond individual initiatives.

A critical part of this will be deepening government engagement and building broader institutional knowledge and support for deliberative approaches across the public sector. We want the capability, relationships and systems that enable deliberative processes to become increasingly embedded within institutions, rather than being dependent on individual relationships or decision-makers. This is fundamental to ensuring the value created through our work can continue well beyond 2030.

Alongside our place-based work, we will capture and share what we learn through a strong knowledge and learning function, grow the ecosystem of partners and practitioners capable of supporting deliberative approaches, and maintain the philanthropic support required to invest in this work and extend its reach.

Underpinning all of this is the capability of Watertrust itself. Over the next five years, we will continue to strengthen our organisational foundations, deepen our approach to First Nations engagement and participation, and build the leadership and specialist capability and succession pathways required for Watertrust's next phase.

Together, these priorities provide the pathway from demonstrating what works in individual places to creating broader and more enduring impact across Australia's water sector.


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Measuring outcomes: Performance against Watertrust's Theory of Change

Watertrust's Theory of Change outlines what success looks like for our organisation, with specific short- to medium-term and long-term goals. This table summarises the evidence of performance against key outcomes.

PERFORMANCE AGAINST WATERTRUST'S THEORY OF CHANGE

Short to Medium Term Outcomes

Active engagement

- Convened the 18-member Stakeholder Advisory Group for the Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed Review and ran the structured decision-making process (5 workshops, 15 baseline interviews, 13 filmed interviews).
- Convened seven-member Lower Balonne Working Group and ran 11 baseline interviews including with First Nations custodians, irrigation-industry representatives, local government, landholders and an agency scientist.
- Deep engagement with 33 people representing 15 groups on Mt Lofty water allocations. Eight workshops plus 17 conversations.
- Presented to more than 100 practitioners (Peter Cullen Trust, Murray-Darling Basin Leaders Summit) on making fairness explicit in water policy.

Understanding and relationships

- The Upper Murrumbidgee end-of-process survey found every respondent left with a better understanding of the evidence base and felt their knowledge was taken seriously.
- Brought together diverse stakeholders with opposing views in deliberative decision-making processes on the Upper Murrumbidgee and Lower Balonne.
- Developed new tools including a multimedia Visual Story for the Lower Balonne to help stakeholders with knowledge of parts of the river to understand the broader river system and each other.
- Leveraged local knowledge and relationships on the Lower Balonne to build trust and increased public access to science and modelling.
- Engaged with First Nations communities in our project work, using advisors on the ground.

Workable solutions

- Recommendations to the Independent Review Panel of the Snowy Water Inquiry Outcomes Implementation Deed (SWIOID) on Upper Murrumbidgee River.
- Submission to Murray–Darling Basin Plan Review on Lower Balonne.

Decision-maker support

- The Commonwealth Government commissioned Watertrust to work alongside it on the SWIOID review.
- The SWIOID Independent Review Panel said the iterative approach to stakeholder feedback was a strength of the review process.
- The Murray–Darling Basin Authority has recognised Watertrust as an "honest broker", free of policy or institutional ties, able to play an important role.
- South Australia State Infrastructure Strategy explicitly references Watertrust's Greater Adelaide work.
- Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board SA is applying fairness work in its water allocation planning amendment process.

Longer-term outcomes

People: Deadlocks broken or avoided

- Stakeholder deadlocks have been broken in geographies where water policy problems have been entrenched for decades. Diverse stakeholders, many with low trust in each other and government policy-making, have worked together on recommendations to the SWIOID (Upper Murrumbidgee) and a submission for the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (Lower Balonne).
- The recommendations made on the Upper Murrumbidgee River have been reflected in the Independent Review Panel's draft report. Government consideration and approval is the final step needed to resolve the policy deadlock.

Systems: Decision-making systems change for the better

- The Commonwealth Government chose a deliberative decision-making process for the SWIOID review.
- SA's Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board is using Watertrust's fairness work to guide water allocation plan amendments in Mt Lofty.

Water: Healthier catchments and communities

- If accepted, the recommendations for the Upper Murrumbidgee River would prevent the gradual death of the river by restoring up to 30 per cent of natural flows, supporting the survival of native and endangered fish and other species, reducing algal blooms, and replenishing water for cultural aspirations and recreation.



Impact beyond Watertrust's major initiatives

STRONGER DECISION MAKING FOR A STRONGER MURRAY–DARLING BASIN PLAN

The Murray–Darling Basin is Australia's largest river system. Spanning four states and a territory, it is more than 1 million square kilometres in size and supplies water to 2.4 million people, countless native habitats and thousands of farms.

The Murray–Darling Basin Plan, established in 2012, was a significant national achievement. However, its implementation continues to face opposition from impacted stakeholders.

Meaningful engagement has been hampered by overly technical information, a lack of access to information, and remote top-down decision-making processes between and within governments.

Watertrust's submission to the Murray–Darling Basin Plan Review focused on mechanisms to improve dialogue between all interested parties. We recommended embedding more deliberative, structured and inclusive practices into key elements of the Plan's governance framework. The seven recommendations we made focused on ways to implement these processes within the Plan.

In the contested world of water policy, disagreements are common. Transparent, inclusive and well-reasoned deliberation can avoid deadlocks, and reduce the risk of ongoing opposition.

LEITH BOULLY ORATION – PUTTING FAIRNESS ON THE AGENDA

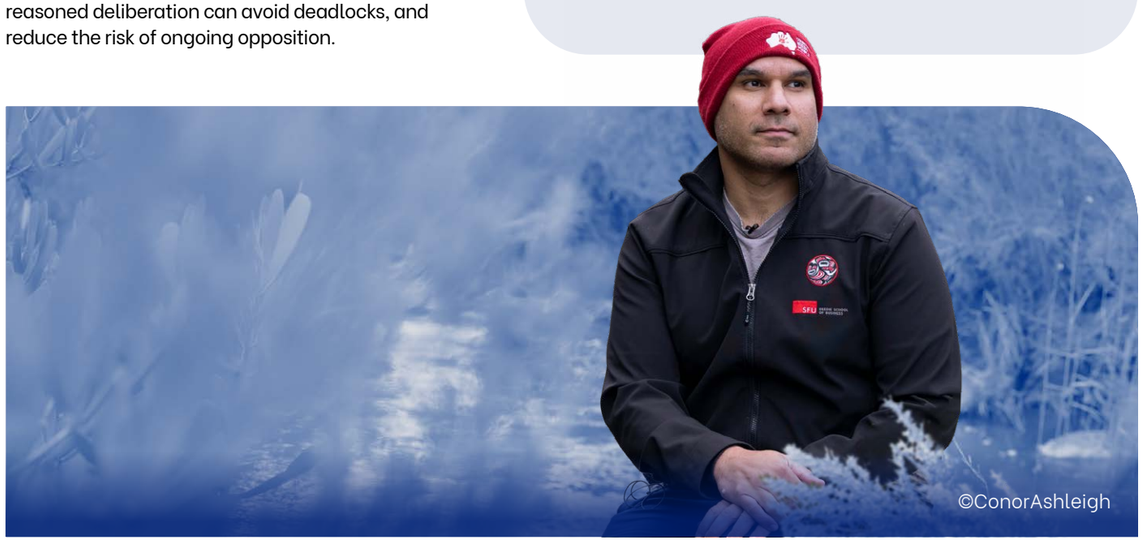
This year, alongside the Murray–Darling Basin Authority's (MDBA) Leaders Summit, our CEO, Karen Hutchinson had the honour of delivering the Leith Boully Oration.

Leith was widely respected across the water sector and served as a Founding Director of Watertrust Australia. Her legacy was formally honoured in January 2026 when she was posthumously appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for significant service to conservation and the environment.

Karen's speech centred on the concept of fairness and how we should think of it as a key principle in a process rather than as an outcome. She discussed how, working with international deliberative specialists, Compass Resource Management, Watertrust has added fairness as a dimension to its decision matrix, a visual tool used to consider different impacts of a decision. Tools like this help to de-risk processes fraught with distrust and assist in resolving disputes before they become deadlocks.

The speech also outlined the need to provide an explicit application of fairness to every stage of the policy cycle to obtain better water policy outcomes.

A full transcript of Karen's speech can be found on the Watertrust website.



Impact across key partnerships

AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCE



Watertrust is fortunate to be incubated at the Australian Academy of Science in Canberra. This close working relationship has provided strong support to Watertrust and enabled us to function to a high capacity. Support services include access to an extensive science and knowledge network, an array of corporate services, and provided strong credibility and independence to our mission.

We look forward to maintaining a close working relationship with the Academy in the period ahead as they continue to champion the use of science in the National interest.

ONE BASIN COOPERATIVE RESEARCH CENTRE

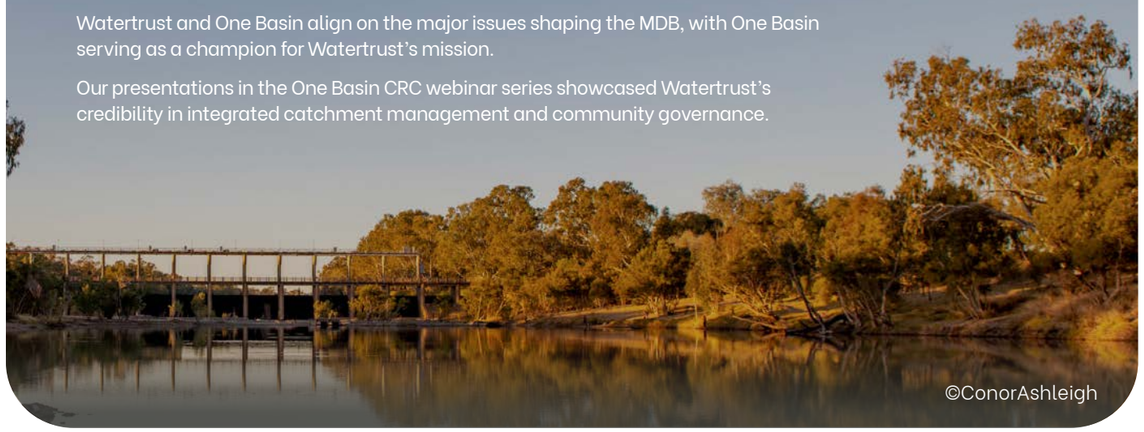
The One Basin Cooperative Research Centre (One Basin) brings together researchers, industry, government, and communities to generate and apply knowledge for a more productive, resilient and sustainable Murray–Darling Basin (MDB).

Like Watertrust, it is independent, non-aligned and a vehicle for systems change. With 93 diverse partners and 4 regional hubs across the MDB, One Basin provides an important vehicle for maintaining and expanding Watertrust's networks.

Our Mount Lofty and Lower Balonne initiatives both have links to One Basin's research work, further strengthening this important partnership. Watertrust is also actively involved in the governance of research projects to ensure they deliver outcomes to support our mission and where relevant, apply our approaches.

Watertrust and One Basin align on the major issues shaping the MDB, with One Basin serving as a champion for Watertrust's mission.

Our presentations in the One Basin CRC webinar series showcased Watertrust's credibility in integrated catchment management and community governance.



PETER CULLEN WATER AND ENVIRONMENT TRUST

Over the past year, Watertrust has strengthened its connection to the Peter Cullen Trust, a not-for-profit organisation that builds leadership capacity to improve Australia's water and environmental management.

In addition to supporting the Peter Cullen Trust's "Recipes for Leadership" panel honoring Leith Boully, Watertrust introduced its fairness work to the Trust's Fellows at their Professional Development day in Adelaide in May.

Watertrust is committed to building an enduring and practical knowledge base to support deliberation in practice. We are pleased to be working with the Peter Cullen Trust, an informed and influential group of current and future leaders, to test our knowledge and develop our tools.



AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, INSTITUTE FOR WATER FUTURES

From September to November 2025, Watertrust again supported an undergraduate student project as part of ANU's Complex Environmental Problems in Action unit, taught by members of the ANU Institute for Water Futures. Watertrust contributed practical knowledge and experience to help students explore real-world water and environmental challenges, including the use of deliberative processes to improve decision-making. Following the success of the collaboration over several years, Watertrust is pleased to be supporting another student project again in 2026.

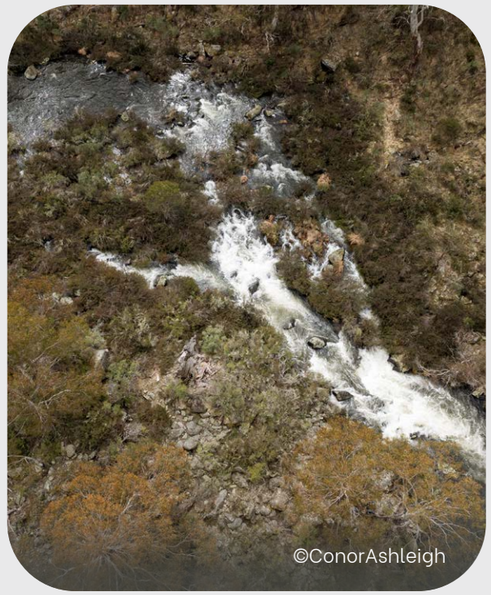
COMPASS RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Watertrust is also forming close working relationships that bring the very best of international expertise into the contested Australian water policy landscape.

Compass Resource Management, a Canadian-based organisation, has over 20 years' experience designing and delivering innovative solutions to breaking policy deadlocks. They specialise in guiding complex stakeholder engagement and decision-making processes.

Through this relationship, we have partnered with Compass to bring this expertise to stakeholder processes for Government Departments such as Commonwealth Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) and the South Australian Department of Environment and Water (DEW).

Working with partners like Compass brings international know how to Australia, driving innovation in process and supporting the expansion of our own deliberative community of practice.



Acknowledgement of funders

Our work is made possible through the gift of philanthropy that enables our independence. We are deeply grateful to the individuals and foundations whose generosity enables us to stay impartial, build trust, and focus on fair and lasting water outcomes.

We also thank our many partners across communities, governments, research institutions and industry who contribute their time, expertise and collaboration to help us make progress on complex water challenges.

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Impact Report

2025/2026

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