



To: NSW South East and Tablelands Planning Team
southeast.tablelands@planning.nsw.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: Australian River Restoration Centre submission on the
South East and Tablelands Regional Plan.**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft South East and Tablelands Regional Plan 2041. We at the Australian River Restoration Centre are passionate about the health and sustainable use of our rivers, waterways, creeks and wetlands. We value our rivers and wetlands for the multiple benefits they provide – life-giving water, plants, animals, transport, economic wealth, recreation, carbon sequestration, and the spiritual connection so many of us feel when we sit or walk along a riverbank.

As we review the 2041 South East and Tablelands Regional Plan, our focus is on the rivers and waterways within the region. We know from experience that improving the health of our waterways increases biodiversity, ensures critical human water needs are met, and delivers better outcomes for First Nations Peoples. The following comments about the 2041 South East and Tablelands Regional Plan are echoed in our related submission to the Regional Water Sharing Plan (RWS), which can be found in Attachment A.

Key comments:

— *State of the region:*

The section of the 2041 Regional Plan entitled ‘What is working well’, states that work to “*Protect the diverse and natural environment*” is positive and proceeding well. While we are lucky enough to contribute to this via our Rivers of Carbon Program, our experience in the Upper Murrumbidgee suggests that protecting our natural environment in this region is not working as well as this statement suggests. This is supported by recent media – particularly in the Eden-Monaro – which rates the region poorly for threatened species conservation.¹

The Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment in particular, has documented an ongoing decline in health, with the latest Catchment Health Indicator Program Report, undertaken by Waterwatch, charting this decline². These impacts have no doubt been exacerbated by the 2019-20 fires that had

¹ [WWF ranks ACT top of threatened species conservation list, Eden-Monaro rates poorly | The Canberra Times | Canberra, ACT](#)

² [Catchment Health Indicator Program \(CHIP\) Reports - Waterwatch](#)

devastating consequences for part of the Upper Murrumbidgee like the Bumbalong Valley, where we are still working with landowners to address erosion, silt mobilization and poor water quality.

We feel that the 2041 Regional Plan needs to provide evidence to support the statement that Protecting the diverse and natural environment is doing 'well' across the region, and request that this information be made publicly available (if not already).

— *Secure water resources:*

We are very pleased to see a regional catchment sub-strategy included as a consideration under the Plan. As outlined in our Regional Water Strategy submission, we believe that the Upper Murrumbidgee River requires special attention to improve a variety of social, environmental and cultural outcomes. In our Submission we provide ideas for improving water management, cross-border governance and better engagement with First Nations.

— *Enhancing sustainable and resilient environments:*

Under the 'Where greater focus is needed' section, clarity is needed surrounding 'improving resilience and sustainability', as it is unclear whether this is referring to environmental, economic, or community resilience and sustainability – information about how the 2041 Regional Plan is addressing each of these areas is required.

— *Recognising Country, people and place:*

We support the increased inclusion of First Nations Peoples and values into the 2041 Regional Plan. We are extremely pleased to see this gap acknowledged and hope to see strong social, cultural and environmental outcomes through the achievement of the noted objectives. In our submission to the Regional Water Strategy (Attachment A), we suggested a program of Aboriginal Waterways Assessments (or another method identified by First Nations) as a priority to support the identification of Cultural sites, values and objectives for water management in the region, as well as strengthening First Nations involvement in natural resource management across the region.

— *Protect important environmental assets & enhance biodiversity, habitats and the connections between them:*

We see these objectives (5 and 6 in the 2041 Regional Plan) as critical for establishing tangible actions across the region to restore and enhance our natural biodiversity. Currently, the strategies outlined under 5.1 only outline the action of 'validating' areas of high ecological value, 'protecting' these areas and 'minimising impacts' from development. Whilst validating, protecting and minimising impacts on these areas is important, we would like to see wording that requires Councils to be proactive in restoring and enhancing habitat via on-ground restoration works to recover and improve the targets of biodiversity, wildlife corridors and habitat. In a post-fire context, on-ground activities such as revegetation, fencing of waterways, erosion reduction, pest plant and animal control, are key areas of work for meeting this environmental objective.

While Objective 6 focusses on enhancing biodiversity, we are wondering whether the current wording limits these activities to areas identified as corridors and refugia. We believe the current wording does not give sufficient direction for agencies to undertake on-ground environmental improvement activities across the landscape. There is a strong focus on areas of high ecological value, corridors and refugia, which we fully support, however, the document seems to favour semi-

urban and urban environments, rather than the broader rural landscapes we know require ongoing restoration work. We recommend the language and nuance be amended to support natural resource management activities to be undertaken across rural and urban areas as a matter of priority. Our [Rivers of Carbon](#) program is an example of the kinds of activities rural landholders can undertake to enhance biodiversity, regardless of whether their area is deemed to be of high ecological value or a corridor. Rivers of Carbon works by supporting landholders to undertake restoration works in riparian areas to improve the environment. The benefits of programs such as ours are backed by scientific evidence and have proven concrete outcomes for biodiversity.

— *Supporting a connected and active region:*

At the Australian River Restoration Centre we look beyond connectivity as simply relating to roads, transport and infrastructure, and expand this term to focus on building relationships between the agencies and people responsible for managing our region. One of the best ways to foster and support a connected and active region is through inter-agency mentoring programs.

We feel that an option to improve connectivity and collaboration across the agencies involved in South East and Tablelands region could be through a mentoring/leadership program. The Victorian [Waterway Management Twinning Program](#), which ran for five years from 2014-2019, helped strengthen relationships across agencies involved in waterway management while also delivering projects across Victoria ranging from pest plant reduction, improved community engagement, habitat restoration, First Nations participation in natural resource management, knowledge sharing and networking. We feel a similar program could deeply strengthen inter-agency and inter-jurisdictional collaboration, ultimately benefiting the implementation of the 2041 Regional Plan and, in turn, benefit regional communities.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on the draft Regional Plan. We look forward to hearing the outcomes of this engagement process.

If you require any further details or have questions, please do not hesitate to contact our Program Manager, Andy Lowes, at Andy.Lowes@arrc.com.au.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Siwan Lovett

Managing Director,
Australian River Restoration Centre.
27 September 2022

Attachments

Attachment A – [Australian River Restoration Centre – Submission to the draft Murrumbidgee Regional Water Strategy \(2022\)](#).

