

New irrigation developments

Overseeing proposals in
Victoria's northern Mallee



Sustainable Landscapes Mallee

Project Snapshot 2008

Making the environment a priority...

Scott McLean believes that management of new irrigation development applications by the Department of Primary Industries' (DPI) has led to a greater priority being placed on environmental issues in the northern Mallee.

Developers must comply with the New Irrigation Development Guidelines, a somewhat complex range of regulations and requirements. DPI plays a valuable guiding role for developers as they commence this process and navigate through it.

When it comes to the environment, DPI adopts a position of avoidance of environmental impacts as its first principle, with negotiations towards minimisation or offsets commencing thereafter.



DPI Sustainable Landscapes Mallee
Irrigation Development Coordinator
Scott McLean

Progress through Partnerships



Since early 2006, DPI Mildura staff have overseen 36 new irrigation development proposals, covering more than 15,500 hectares of land. In many of these cases, DPI's approach has led all parties to seek new ways to achieve environmental outcomes. Resulting innovations include: the practice of under-boring (ie. going underneath instead of through) vegetation when laying pipelines, using flexible pipes to detour around established trees, and using larger pipes to reduce the number used. Minimising infrastructure can greatly reduce the environmental impact of a development.

The introduction of buffers (land set aside by developers between the area of irrigated horticulture and existing remnant native vegetation) as a standard requirement



In a nutshell...

- DPI is the prime contact point for new irrigation development in the northern Mallee.
- DPI's management focusses on sustainable production, and provides developers with an early understanding of their environmental responsibilities.
- DPI has achieved a good balance between both environmental and production outcomes on the 36 new irrigation development proposals (covering 15,500 hectares of northern Mallee) progressed since early 2006.

DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

is another positive of the process. Based on DSE direction, and the outcomes of associated DPI research, buffers of between 25-50m are now a standard requirement in all new irrigation developments. Developments that are sited adjacent to significant sites such as National Parks have more stringent requirements for buffers, which can then be up to 200m. Buffers protect native vegetation from exposure to the variety of practices involved in horticultural production.

DPI management of the approval process has also enhanced the on-farm operating standard where land use change has seen dryland farms converted to irrigated horticulture on a large scale. Developers seeking approval must employ best management and operational practices, such as professional irrigation design and the use of irrigation drainage management plans. They should also have a whole of property plan to minimise the environmental impact of planned infrastructure such as roads, dams and sheds. The stringency of these requirements has had flow on benefits to the region, through increased water use efficiency and a reduction in salinity and other

environmental impacts.

According to Scott, managing the new irrigation development process is not always an easy task for DPI.

“It is often hard to reconcile environmental needs with the requirements of new irrigation developers (who are often large corporations) as they seek to maximise the productive land area available,” he explained. “Developers generally understand that they have a responsibility to the environment, but often find it hard to justify to their shareholders as it impacts on their bottom line.”

“Most corporations know the requirements and adhere to them, but they don’t do it just out of the goodness of their hearts. That’s where we come in.

“Our management of the process enables a greater balance between economic and environmental priorities and, although it is sometimes a rocky road, I think we have achieved some good results for all involved.’

What is the northern Mallee new irrigation development process?

What is the process?

1. Applicants contact or are directed to DPI and are provided with the **New Irrigation Development Guidelines** (currently being updated).
2. Once a development proposal is received, **DPI guides the applicant through the approval process.**
3. The relevant **water authority** is contacted to confirm that licence and water supply arrangements are being actively progressed.
4. **Discussions** are held with the applicant re:
Property:
Providing an early understanding of the approval process, and potential environmental considerations.
Pump sites & pipeline routes
Ensuring they comply to DSE siting and design guidelines, and encouraging clustering or use of existing sites to minimise environmental impacts.
Cultural heritage
Referring to requirements of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria.

Footprint

Minimisation of the social and environmental impacts.

Requirements of other agencies

Overview of what else is required.

5. A **physical visit** is made to the intended development site, where environmental checks and other requirements are commenced.
6. A **written assessment** is prepared and progressed.

Who does it apply to?

All irrigation developments in the northern Mallee where:

- A change in land use is involved and there has not previously been a water licence attached.
- There is a proposal to significantly increase in the annual water use limit and/or a proposal to clear native vegetation.
- There is a proposal to increase the area allowed to be irrigated in the licence.

Further information

Available from Scott McLean at DPI Mildura on 03 50514500.