

Merbein Common



Clockwise from top: Mallee Catchment Management Authority (CMA) Chief Executive Officer Jenny Collins, Victorian Water Minister Harriet Shing, and Mallee CMA Chairperson Allison McTaggart at the official opening of the Catfish Billabong Regulator, Merbein Common; Traditional Owners, partner agency representatives and Mallee CMA staff at the regulator; Victorian Water Minister Harriet Shing and Aunty Janine Wilson plant a tree to mark the opening of the regulator.

Catfish Billabong Regulator officially opened

The long-awaited Catfish Billabong Regulator project is now complete - and not only is it impressive to see, it's already hard at work managing the flow between the billabong and the Murray River and restoring the health of the billabong!

Victorian Water Minister Harriet Shing joined the First People of the Millewa-Mallee Aboriginal Corporation and community members to celebrate the official opening of the \$2 million environmental regulator in November.

The regulator will help restore natural flows to the beloved 65-hectare billabong, providing a healthy and nutrient-rich

environment for the surrounding River Red Gums, 29 fauna and 12 flora species that call the billabong home.

“The Catfish Billabong Regulator Project is an example of how Victoria delivers tangible environmental projects by working in partnership with Traditional Owners and communities to save Murray River floodplains,” Minister Shing said.

Catfish Billabong is not only a beautiful local landmark, but it's an important refuge for bird and fish species and supports cultural values, creating opportunities for Traditional Owners to share their cultural knowledge.

It's also a popular spot for locals and tourists alike, offering an array of recreational activities including fishing, canoeing, camping, bird watching and hiking.

In addition to the regulator itself, a wide range of complementary works have also been undertaken at the site, including access track upgrades, car parking improvements, visitor signage and seating.

But don't just take our word for it – head out to the Merbein Common and see the improvements for yourself!



Representatives from the First People of the Millewa-Mallee Aboriginal Corporation (FPMMAC) with one of the fish hotels at Brickworks Billabong; (below) Brickworks Billabong during its drying phase. The billabong has now refilled.

Brickworks Billabong rehabilitation underway

Mallee CMA is working alongside the First People of the Millewa-Mallee Aboriginal Corporation (FPMMAC) to rehabilitate Brickworks Billabong at Merbein Common, with some exciting improvements completed and more to come.

The managed dry period for Brickworks Billabong is now complete - the carp have been eradicated, and around 150ML of environmental water has been delivered.

But what does this all mean?

Brickworks Billabong has been reset and is now fresh, flowing and is ready for the reintroduction of the Murray Hardyhead (*Craterocephalus fluviatilis*) fish!

These small bodied native fish are an endangered species, and they prefer saline waterbodies – which makes Brickworks Billabong a great option for a long-term translocation site as it’s a permanent saline wetland!



Brickworks Billabong needs to be managed separately to the neighboring Cowanna Billabong as it is more saline, which is good news for Murray Hardyhead, as they need more brackish water to thrive.

FPMMAC have the future homes of Murray Hardyhead covered with the construction of 5 “fish hotels” made from locally-sourced timber.

The fish hotels will help provide safety, shelter and refuge from predators for the tiny Murray Hardyhead.

Now that Brickworks Billabong is returning to tip-top shape, the translocation of the Murray Hardyhead to the billabong is expected to happen early in 2025.

This project was supported by the Victorian Government’s Flood Recovery Program.



Catfish Billabong Regulator

The Catfish Billabong Regulator has been attracting a lot of interest in recent months, with everyone from the Friends of Merbein Common and local Rotary Club members to scientific researchers wanting to learn more about it.

The Friends of Merbein Common and Merbein Rotary Club were among one of the first local groups keen to visit the regulator to learn why this piece of floodplain infrastructure is needed, which was closely followed by around 80 attendees at the One Basin Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) annual event visiting to discuss how and why the regulator was built, and how it will be operated.

In late November, Mallee CMA also met with a visiting delegation of researchers from the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology and Faculty of Science. The delegation's visit to the region was organized by the Mallee Regional Innovation Centre and included an on-site tour of the Catfish Billabong Regulator.

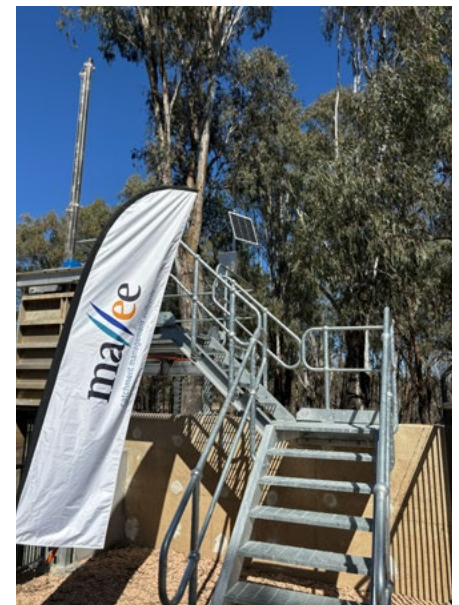
At all of these events there has been great discussion about the benefits delivered by floodplain infrastructure,

such as the reintroduction of more natural wetting and drying cycles, and improved wetland and floodplain health, which means better conditions for plants and animals to thrive in. Infrastructure such as the Catfish Billabong Regulator also means it's possible to deliver all these benefits and more, using significantly less water than would be required to create a flood in the Murray River high enough to spill over the banks and reach the billabong. By using temporary pumps to deliver water to a wetland such as Catfish Billabong, only the water needed is delivered (as opposed to large volumes of water that would be required to create river flows high enough to reach the wetland). The regulator wall and gates mean the water can then be held in the wetland for as long as it is needed.

The Catfish Billabong Regulator is one of many sites across the Mallee where infrastructure is used to restore the health of wetlands and floodplains. Other sites include Mulcra and Lindsay Islands (toward the South Australian border), Hattah Lakes and Kings Billabong. Plans to build infrastructure at other sites are also under development, including through the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project.

Catfish Billabong Regulator

- Prior to river regulation, Catfish Billabong would have been inundated on average 93 times per 100 years.
- Once locks and weirs were installed in the Murray River, Catfish Billabong became permanently connected to the river and lost the important variations in water levels that wetlands need to be healthy.
- The regulator allows Catfish Billabong to be a permanent freshwater wetland, with seasonal variation in water levels.
- Catfish Billabong will be surcharged via pumping every second year in late winter/spring to inundate fringing woodland, then allowed to recede through summer/autumn.



Protecting the Merbein Common from invasive species

Mallee CMA's latest pest plant and animal control program is now underway at the Merbein Common, with the 1000 hectare site, including culturally sensitive areas, protected from serious threats to the landscape's native flora and fauna.

As a result of the 2022 flood, a new seedbank of invasive weeds germinated throughout Merbein Common, threatening to overtake the existing healthy vegetation.

Rabbits, which are one of Australia's most destructive pest animals, sought higher ground and populated to extremely high numbers, posing a huge threat to native habitat.

In collaboration with Parks Victoria the Common has undergone invasive weed and pest reduction, helping to minimize the damage and devastation caused by invasive species. This work is supported by the Victorian Government's Flood Recovery Program.

What's not common about Merbein Common?

Merbein Common is one of only five sites in Victoria known to host the Dwarf Lanternflower (*Abutilon fraseri*), which is "endangered" in Victoria.

Friends of Merbein Common recognised at awards

The old saying "teamwork makes the dream work" could certainly have been coined about the Friends of Merbein Common (FOMC), with the local group recently awarded a *Highly Commended* certificate in the Outstanding Environmental Group category by the Victorian Environment Friends Network (VEFN).

The VEFN Outstanding Environmental Group award recognises groups of environmental volunteers who are actively working together to protect, restore, enhance and promote the Victorian natural environment or indigenous species and the need for its care.

For almost a quarter of a century, FOMC have remained dedicated to the regeneration of the Merbein Common landscape, tirelessly advocating for the health of the floodplain, wetlands, and all the species that call it home.

FOMC are a small but dedicated group who represent a broad cross-section of the Merbein and broader community,



Above: Members of the Friends of Merbein Common with their certificate.

with a focus on regenerating the area from overgrazing, removing rubbish and rehabilitating the site, protecting native species, enhancing the Common and protecting it from surrounding urban pressures for future generations.

The group was also a key stakeholder in developing the Mallee Catchment Management Authority's Community-Led

Action Plan for Merbein Common, and they regularly collaborate with Mallee CMA to deliver activities and events that encourage community participation, including events highlighting local wildlife such as bats, as well as birdwatching and community walks.

Congratulations FOMC, on a well-deserved achievement!

How can I find out more?

For more information on partnering with Traditional Owners and community members to enhance Merbein Common, contact:

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