



Thriving, healthy and biodiverse natural environments

For the biodiversity and health of our waterways, habitats and wildlife to be protected and enhanced to deliver environmental, economic and recreational benefits for current and future generations of residents and visitors.



Support for the Northern Rivers Watershed Initiative (NRWI)

On 8 February 2019, the NRJO members comprising Ballina Shire Council, Byron Shire Council, Kyogle Council, Lismore City Council, Richmond Valley Council, Rous County Council and Tweed Shire Council endorsed a landmark agreement to restore the Tweed, Brunswick, Richmond and Evans River systems.

Goal: The NRWI brings a holistic approach to the management of water within the catchments that will utilize modern, best practice approaches to catchment management modelling and natural flood mitigation to target improvements in stream bank condition and river health that also contribute to reduced flood risk within the catchments.

Background: Ecohealth is an aquatic ecosystem monitoring program that measures how healthy our rivers and estuaries are for the plants and animals that live in them. It involves an assessment of water quality, riparian vegetation, geomorphic (channel) condition, macroinvertebrates (water bugs), fish (distribution and population sizes) and plankton.

A recent Ecohealth assessment of the Richmond River overall found the river to be a 'D-' - in a 'poor condition' and one of the worst in NSW. Whilst not as degraded, the Tweed, Brunswick and Evans River systems face similar challenges. Poor Ecohealth outcomes across the NR also lead to compromised social and economic values within the catchment and estuarine systems.

Climate change is projected to bring more hot days, bushfires, droughts and intense storms to the NR, placing further strain on water resources and bringing more extreme weather events.

Policy Context: Key modules comprising the NRWI deliver against a range of goals and strategic actions identified in the Strategic Regional Priorities 2019–2022 (NRJO, 2018), demonstrating alignment of the NRWI with the regional priorities that have been established by the NRJO.

The NRWI would integrate both NFM measures and implementation of high priority Coastal Zone Management Plan (CZMP) actions throughout the Tweed, Brunswick, Richmond and Evans River catchments and estuaries. By 2020, the CZMP will transition to a new framework consistent with the guidelines under the Coastal Management Act 2016. Any actions in a Coastal Management Plan (CMP) need to be implemented through a council's Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) framework and land-use planning systems. The injection of external resources will be needed, otherwise high priority actions within future CMPs will be truncated to align with a council's existing budgetary process.

Implementation: The NRWI would consist of the following key modules:

- Soil health improvement
- Riparian restoration and catchment revegetation
- Agronomic best management practice
- Redesigned floodplain drainage to meet contemporary standards
- Sustainable agriculture reform package (including buy backs)
- Scientific framework for landscape design and monitoring.

NRWI will feature genuine and active consultation and partnerships with landholders, industry, stakeholder groups, community groups, Landcare, all levels of government and the broader community to involve a regional collaborative effort. It will be coordinated by Rous County Council in partnership with the NRJO and its member Councils.

Problem: The NSW Government's Sea Level Rise Policy (DECCW, 2009) states that sea level rise is inevitable and establishes planning benchmarks to be adopted in NSW. These benchmarks are an increase above 1990 sea levels of 40 cm by 2050 and 90 cm by 2100, an average increase of 0.8 cm per year.

Sea level rise in the Richmond River estuary is anticipated to result in a broad range of issues including tidal inundation and landward recession of low-lying ecosystems, increased salt penetration through the estuary and adjoining wetland systems, increased bank erosion and implications for drainage and flooding in urban and agricultural areas. This issue has broad implications, affecting most of the other estuary issues in some way and therefore needs to be considered as part of all management and planning for the estuary.

Support and Partnerships

Development of the NRWI concept has been informed by discussions between the Rous County Council Chair and industry, university, community, and government representatives regarding the progression of initiatives to address river health and flooding in the Northern Rivers catchments. This concept has since been reviewed internally by Rous County Council staff. Additional consultation has been undertaken at officer-level with representatives from all councils, NSW Government agencies and the research community.

A key aspect of the further development of the NRWI will be to integrate with existing initiatives across all stakeholder groups in each river system. This includes coordination with the rollout of the NSW Government Marine Estate Management Strategy and the Richmond River Governance and Funding Framework that has been co-funded by the Office of Environment and Heritage and local government.

Solution and Actions sought:

Preliminary scoping of the scale of work needed to address this initiative indicates that a budget in the order of \$150 million over 10 to 15 years would be required to affect the necessary changes across the landscape.

