

# Northern Rivers Watershed Initiative

Responsible Officer: Group Manager Planning and Delivery (Andrew Logan)

---

## Recommendation

That Council receive and note the proposed arrangements for Stage 1 implementation of the Northern Rivers Watershed Initiative.

## Background

The Northern Rivers Watershed Initiative (NRWI) was originally developed by Rous County Council (Rous) in 2019 in response to community concerns with respect to river health in the Northern Rivers and the high level of interest in natural flood management techniques.

The NRWI is a catchment and estuary restoration program that has been specifically devised for the Northern Rivers Joint Organisation (NRJO) footprint to address ecosystem health, water security and flood risk issues across the Tweed, Brunswick, Richmond and Evans River systems in an integrated fashion. The NRWI is based on a holistic approach to the management of water within the catchments that will utilise modern, best practice approaches in catchment 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.

The NRWI is a strategy that requires large-scale investment in catchment works in upper catchment areas that restore natural hydrologic functions that deliver both improvements in stream bank condition and river health and that also contribute to reduced flood risk within the catchment. In addition, it would also involve implementation of coastal zone management actions to address high priority estuarine health issues. These measures would deliver a range of environmental, social and economic benefits.

Preliminary scoping of the scale of work needed to effect landscape-scale change indicated at that time that a budget in the order of \$150 million over 10 to 15 years would be required to effect the necessary change.

The NRWI was considered at the December 2018 meeting of Rous and it was resolved that Council (119/18):

1. *Provides in-principle support of the proposed Northern Rivers Watershed Initiative discussion paper in relation to funding under the NSW Government's Snowy-Hydro Legacy Fund as attached to the report.*
2. *Note that the discussion paper forms the basis of consultation with constituent councils/key stakeholders.*
3. *Note that the finalised discussion paper following consultation will be supplied to the Northern Rivers Joint Organisation for its February 2019 meeting.*

A copy of the 2019 strategy can be viewed at the following link:

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:ap:7fe8a3eb-5e8a-4fc7-b83f-b7cf2918b1c8>

Over the intervening period, Rous has sought funding from the NSW Government and other funding opportunities for implementation of the strategy. The Hon Janelle Saffin MP (Member for Lismore) also made direct representations to the former NSW Government and also emphasised the importance of the NRWI in the Legislative Assembly.

During the 2023 election campaign, the current NSW Government committed to investing in a number of individual projects. The Hon Janelle Saffin MP secured \$5M dedicated to the implementation of a package of 'shovel-ready' works for the NRWI, which represents the first funding package secured for implementation of the NRWI.

These election commitments are being administered through guidelines established by the Department of Regional NSW (DRNSW). In accordance with these guidelines, Rous lodged the detailed project plan for this \$5M funding package on 20 May 2024.

The project plan provides for a 2 year program of works as described below.

1. *Soil health improvement program*: Orchard floor management, drainage and soil stabilization plans on an estimated 25 macadamia farms/implementation of identified earthworks/site stabilisation measures. Targeted at areas of high water quality risk (sediment, nutrients). Additional support for 20 landholders to understand, measure and improve soil carbon.
2. *Riparian restoration and catchment revegetation program*: Improvements in waterway condition to establish self-sustaining vegetated buffer zones requiring minimal maintenance, generating water quality/ecological benefits. Weed removal, off-stream water, cattle exclusion, fencing, stabilization of riverbanks and planting 100,000 trees.
3. *Redesigned floodplain drainage to meet contemporary standards*: The management of agricultural lands in catchments/floodplains influences water quality/riparian vegetation. This project involves minimising environmental impacts from floodplain drainage infrastructure whilst maintaining levels of service. Working with landholders/local councils to conduct on-ground works within Keith Hall drainage system; and additional hydrological options studies for drainage modifications at Boggy Creek (Bungawalbyn Creek floodplain).
4. *Landscape hydration program*: Using natural flood management techniques, this project aims to slow flows, retain soil fertility, and reduce runoff in rural catchments. Working in partnership with landholders using natural sequence farming methods and conducting landscape hydration works, we will engage landholders trained in natural sequence farming to complete site plans/execute works on their properties.

## **Governance**

- **Finance**

The DRNSW funding will provide all required funds for execution of the on-ground works. The project will be implemented in partnership with the majority of the NRJO Councils (with the exception of Clarence Valley Council as the Clarence River was not part of the original strategy adopted). There will be in-kind contributions by these Northern Rivers Councils in executing these works, although the majority of the funds can be administered by existing Council staff through existing natural resource management incentives programs.

- **Environment**

The works that are the subject of this \$5M investment will lead to positive and lasting environmental outcomes within the Northern Rivers catchments.

- **Legal**

Implementation of the identified program of works is consistent with the types of works that all of the Councils involved already undertake within their respective areas and so can be implemented in accordance with existing policies and procedures.

### **Consultation**

After endorsement by Rous 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 the landmark agreement to restore the Tweed, Brunswick, Richmond and Evans River systems via the NRWI. It is now a key regional strategy under the NRJO 'Thriving, healthy and biodiverse natural environments' theme: <https://www.northernriversjo.nsw.gov.au/prioritiesand-projects/biodiverse-natural>

Prior to submission of the detailed project plan to DRNSW, consultation was undertaken with all Councils to establish agreed arrangements for implementation. Under these arrangements and following execution of the funding deed, funds would be allocated to the partner Councils (and several other catchment partners) to implement the program of works.

### **Conclusion**

The Northern Rivers Watershed Initiative - adopted by Council in February 2019 and subsequently endorsed by the NRJO, involves undertaking works in the Richmond, Evans, Brunswick and Tweed catchments to improve river health and restore natural hydrologic functioning to deliver environmental, social and economic benefits. It includes soil health improvement/soil conservation on macadamia/grazing farms; riparian restoration and catchment revegetation; redesigned floodplain drainage and natural flood mitigation/landscape hydration.

Whilst preliminary scoping of the scale of work needed to effect landscape-scale change indicated that a budget in the order of \$150 million over 10 to 15 years would be required to affect the necessary changes, a \$5M funding commitment was secured by the Hon Janelle Saffin ahead of the 2023 NSW State election as an initial series of actions. This commitment was based on a submission to deliver 4 headline ('shovel-ready') projects to the value of \$5M. Based on this package, a detailed project plan has now been lodged with DRNSW. It is anticipated that a funding deed will be entered into with DRNSW early in 2024/25.