

## MEDIA RELEASE

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# Study details pandemic impacts on recreational water use, visitation

THE latest findings of a study into the social and economic value of recreational and environmental water in the Wimmera Southern Mallee has detailed the staggering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic first impacted visitation to Wimmera Southern Mallee waterbodies in March 2020, forcing the cancellation of many planned events at Easter and the traditionally busy autumn period.

Caravan parks and camping grounds at the lakes and weir pools were closed and overnight visitors were not allowed - with only a few exceptions in circumstances where people demonstrated they had no alternative place to stay. These restrictions effectively continued until the end of the 2019-20 year.

The Wimmera Development Association-lead study is called *Wimmera Southern Mallee: Socio-economic value of recreational and environmental water* and is in its fifth year. It found the estimated economic contribution of 27 selected recreational water facilities during 2020-21 was \$24.94 million – a decrease of 12 per cent on the \$28.49 million in 2019-20 which, in turn, was a 15 per cent decrease on 2018-19.

Wimmera Development Association project manager Mark Fletcher said the study continued a co-operative effort with local government and community groups to quantify the social and economic benefits of recreational and environmental water across the region.

He said key findings estimated there were:

- In excess of 251,694 people – down from 280,000 in 2019-20 at the waterways
- More than 157,000 visit nights – down from 175,000
- A huge drop in interstate visitation to lakes and weir pools and a total absence of overseas visitors. The percentage of visitors from interstate and overseas fell from a 'pre-pandemic' 13.7 per cent of total participants in 2018-19 to 4.3 per cent in 2020-21

- A decrease in recreational water users of 10.8 per cent in 2020-21, compounding the 14 per cent decrease recorded in 2019-20. More significantly, the number of overnight visitors decreased an estimated 18.2 per cent in 2020-21 after a 39 per cent decrease in 2019-20; however, higher average daily expenditure levels (after limited opportunities to eat out, travel and participate in sport and social activities) at several lakes and weir pools located in, or near, towns with more extensive 'visitor services' (hotel/motel accommodation, cafés and restaurants, and other retail outlets) were recorded

"In 2020-21 pandemic restrictions were periodic and, although regional Victoria was often exempt from strict lockdowns imposed on metropolitan Melbourne, the whole year was plagued with uncertainty and a degree of travel hesitancy," Mr Fletcher said.

"The report has also highlighted the important contribution to the region's towns by providing enhanced amenity and a critical outlet for physical and mental relaxation, improving the overall health and wellbeing of residents and visitors."

Wimmera Development Association has worked with Street Ryan and Associates to deliver the study, engaging with recreational water participants, committees of management, sporting clubs and other groups involved in recreational water activity. The Victorian Government's Water for Victoria program has funded the 2020-21 study via the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, GWMWater and Wimmera Southern Mallee councils.

Work over five years has provided important information supporting capital investment and grant applications of about \$10 million, with some applications still pending.

Organisations such as the Wimmera CMA, GWMWater and DELWP have used the study's findings for future planning. GWMWater has utilised results when planning allocation of pipeline water to recreational lakes and weir pools.

Wimmera Development Association is the peak advocacy body behind many major, emerging projects in the region. It supports businesses, promotes economic development opportunities to investors and is a key link between industry and governments, lobbying for improved infrastructure and for regional priority issues.

**ENDS**

Media contact: Jessica Grimble on 0429 811 744.