

MEDIA RELEASE

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Local waterway visitation almost doubles during pandemic: Study

WIMMERA Southern Mallee lakes and weir pools have provided important social and recreational outlets for local residents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Wimmera Development Association-lead study – called *Wimmera Southern Mallee: Socio-economic value of recreational and environmental water* and in its fifth year – has found local residents turned to holidays close to home as restrictions relating to the pandemic cancelled trips further afield.

Wimmera Development Association project manager Mark Fletcher said while overall participation was understandably lower, the percentage of local recreational water users almost doubled – from about 20 per cent to more than 37 per cent in 2020-21.

He said the percentage of water users from elsewhere in Victoria – including country and metropolitan areas – fell from about 54 per cent to 47 per cent during the same period. The percentage of recreational water users from interstate and overseas fell by more than two-thirds - from about 14 per cent to about four per cent.

“With easing of restrictions and the onset of spring weather, the region’s waterways and attractions are ready for events and visitation to ramp up,” Mr Fletcher said.

“Local markets, activities and festivals all play a significant part in building stronger communities and it is great to see restrictions start easing to allow planning for these activities with more certainty. The flow-on benefits to towns and regions cannot be underestimated, from both economic and social senses.”

Wimmera Development Association has worked with Street Ryan and Associates to deliver the study, engaging with recreational water users, committees of management, sporting clubs and other groups involved in recreational water activity. The Victorian Government’s Water for Victoria program has

funded the study via the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, GWMWater and Wimmera Southern Mallee councils.

The work across 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 the study when planning allocation of pipeline water to recreational lakes.

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.

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