

Adoption and implementation of the Wallis Lake Wetlands Strategy



Council Name: Great Lakes Council

Web Address: www.greatlakes.nsw.gov.au

Size: 3,376 sq km

Population: 35,487



Abstract: In October 2010, Council adopted a Wetlands Strategy for Wallis Lake. This Strategy sets out the vision, guiding principles and actions for positive wetland recognition, conservation and restoration across the Wallis Lake catchment. It recognises the importance of partnerships in achieving sound outcomes in wetland management. Further, it embeds a recognition and need for wetland protection and management across all facets of Council decision-making and activities. Since its adoption, Great Lakes Council has been actively implementing the Strategy and significant progress has been made. Council, with its project partners, has continued its successful wetlands acquisition program. Wetland protection has also been embedded in development assessment and strategic planning and Council continues to promote wetland education and awareness.

Background:

In 1997, oysters in Wallis Lake were affected by a Hepatitis A outbreak and in 1999, a significant plume event of toxic water from a drained acid sulfate coastal floodplain wetland in the catchment was observed. These events were indicators of the degree of degradation and impairment of function that had occurred and were the catalysts for the development of a strategic catchment and water quality program for Wallis Lake. Furthermore, scientific and agency publications around that time (eg. NSW Wetlands Management Policy 1996) had documented the plight of wetland systems.

Consequently, the Wallis Lake Catchment Management Plan (2003), Estuary Management Plan (2005) and Water Quality Improvement Plan (2009), documented the suite of actions required to restore the ecological condition and function of the lake and its catchment. These Plans all identified the need for an effective Wetlands Strategy.

In a broader context, the Catchment Action Plan of the Hunter/ Central Rivers CMA also recognised the need for strategic wetland protection and in 2010, a new NSW Wetlands Policy was adopted. In referencing such, the Strategy sought to identify efficiencies and coordination of management of wetlands between State agencies and Council.

Finally, the Great Lakes community also recognised the importance of wetland systems and were advocating for their protection to enhance the condition and function of local aquatic systems. As such, Council has been the key driver of the Strategy and its implementation, but has benefited from the support of stakeholders, the community and Government agencies.



Restored wetland in the Darawakh Creek



The adoption of the Strategy was therefore a direct response to the past loss and impairment of wetlands and the negative consequences of such. The objectives were thus devised and adopted to reflect this and to establish a positive framework for future management. The Strategy was adopted with overwhelming political and community support.

Implementation:

The Wallis Lake Wetlands Strategy was prepared in house, but drew from the advice of published information, recognised experts and the views of the community and agency stakeholders. Thus, the Council staff responsible for the preparation of the Strategy were engaged and empowered and accumulated significant knowledge of wetlands and wetland management. This has contributed to the effectiveness and rapidity with which the Strategy has been implemented. There is empathy and awareness across Council of the importance of wetlands and their functions, which has influenced a whole of Council approach to sustainable wetlands conservation, management and restoration. Ultimately, the community is the beneficiary of enhanced and improved wetland systems. Therefore, the community has been well-informed of the adoption and implementation of this Strategy.

With regards to implementation, thirteen key actions have been identified. The satisfactory achievement of these actions depends on a whole-of-Council commitment to the adopted Vision, Guiding Principles and Actions. In this respect, Council's Natural Systems Branch has supervised and coordinated the Wetlands Program and provided the expert technical guidance and advice to the elected representatives and other Council Branches. This Branch has also facilitated the acquisition of at-risk privately-held wetlands for public conservation.

The Natural Systems Branch is not solely responsible for implementation however and the proactive support of all branches of Council has been critical to the implementation of the program. In this regard, Council Strategic and Development Assessment Planners have assisted to implement the Strategy through their land use and strategic planning decision-making. Significant achievements have been realised through the statutory and regulatory land use framework for the protection of wetland systems. Council Engineers now better consider the impact of their activities on natural wetlands and are actively delivering stormwater control and management activities in a manner that better protects wetlands and their functions. Parks and Reserves Managers are valuing and protecting wetlands under their care and control. Finally, there is a commitment to educating the wider community through deeds and words about the importance of wetland systems.

Outcomes:

The following achievements have been made:

- There has been communication with agency and stakeholder partners and the development of effective partnerships, based on synergies, shared efforts and mutual understanding. This has led to cooperation for wetland management and restoration, based on common and shared goals.
- As part of Council's conversion to a new Principal LEP, the Strategy is directing the appropriate rezoning of significant wetland systems for environmental protection. Further, Council has resolved to adopt the Model Local Provision for Wetlands, which will lead to the better protection of wetlands.
- Inquiries have been made with relevant Government agencies concerning the possible Ramsar listing of Wallis Lake and its wetlands. These discussions have established a platform for future consultations.
- Through the Strategy, Council has developed a formal, documented position on the protection of wetlands and their function, the conservation of wetlands and criteria for wetland buffers and connecting habitats. These clearly-stated positions are being enforced through Council actions and decision-making.
- The Strategy has defined an explicit criterion for the prioritisation of wetland expenditure. NRM funds are limited and the Strategy now more actively delivers the available funding to the highest wetland priorities.

- Council has used Environmental Special Rate funds, matched with CMA and external grants, to acquire two key privately-held wetland systems of 56-hectares in size (at Darawakh and Wallamba Island). These wetlands are now publicly conserved in perpetuity and are no longer threatened by changed or intensified private land use.
- The Strategy defines the approach to be adopted for the conservation and management of wetlands held on Crown Land and Council ownership.
- Development and land use activities within and above wetlands are now better regulated to maintain and conserve wetland systems.
- Council is extending its wetland vegetation mapping program to gain a greater understanding of the diversity and geographic location of wetland systems.
- Finally, there is greater recognition and awareness of the importance of wetland systems and the Strategy has been an excellent communication tool.

Future:

The development and implementation of the Strategy has been driven by an identified need in broader catchment management programs. This has engendered overwhelming support from all stakeholders. The Strategy also recognises the need for experiential, adaptive management to ensure that achievements are cumulative and ongoing.

The benefits of this project will be ongoing as the Strategy, and its administration, provides for monitoring, evaluation and reporting. The culture and process of wetland protection and management in this Council associated with the Strategy appears ingrained across all areas of Council (and its project partners). This suggests that risks of discontinuation or altered focus would be very low, even with changes to personnel or the body of elected representatives. With increasing recognition and awareness, the achievements in wetland protection of this Council should only escalate and consolidate into the future.

References:

http://www.greatlakes.nsw.gov.au/Environment/Plans_and_Strategies

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Wallamba Island, a 36-ha island in the lower Wallamba River system, which Council has acquired for water quality and biodiversity protection