

Traditional Owner Flood Recovery Forum Report

Loddon Mallee Region

March 2023



Cover image

Traditional Owner Flood Recovery Forum
attendees walking towards Little Murray Weir.
Photo credit: Tammy Nancuro

We are committed to genuinely partner and meaningfully engage with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

DEECA is committed to genuinely partnering with Victorian Traditional Owners and Victoria's Aboriginal community to progress their aspirations.



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Aboriginal self-determination at DEECA

Pupangarli Marnmarnepu 'Owning Our Future' – Aboriginal Self-Determination Reform Strategy 2020–2025 is a 5-year roadmap to enable self-determination at DEECA by honouring the rights and dignity of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians.

Pupangarli Marnmarnepu is Wadi Wadi and Mutti Mutti language for 'Owning Our Future'.

Mutti Mutti, Tati Tati and Wadi Wadi language is used throughout the *Pupangarli Marnmarnepu 'Owning Our Future' – Aboriginal Self-Determination Reform Strategy*.

The Mutti Mutti, Tati Tati and Wadi Wadi Kulingi (people) are Murray River First Nations. Their *yalingi* (language) is part of the Western Kulin/Murray River languages. DEECA thanks the Mutti Mutti, Tati Tati and Wadi Wadi Traditional Owners for providing their language to name this strategy.

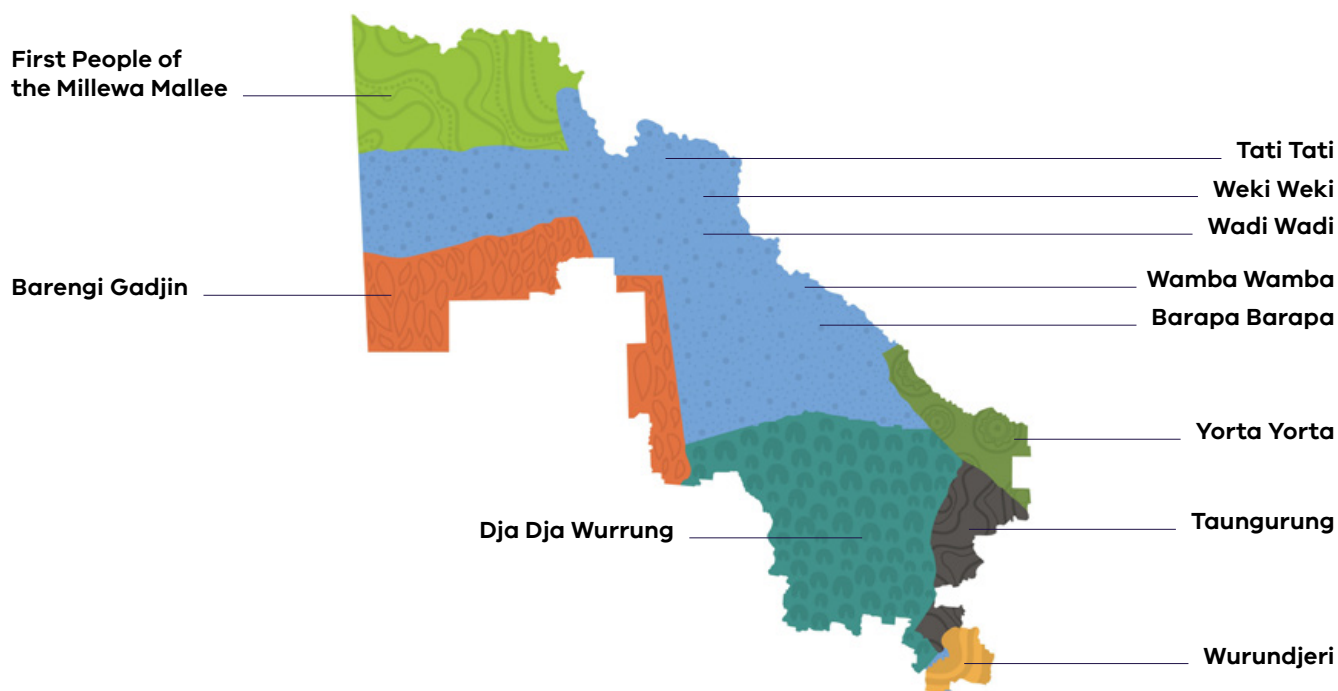
Each year priority actions are identified for DEECA to deliver on this strategy, with each region developing an implementation action plan to show how it will contribute to fulfilling these priority actions.

Aboriginal self-determination is about Aboriginal people being at the centre of decision-making around the issues that affect their lives. To enable self-determination in the Loddon Mallee region, we work with Traditional Owners on Country in ways that best suit them.

Loddon Mallee region leads DEECA's partnerships with Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation (DDWCAC) and First People's Millewa Mallee Aboriginal Corporation (FPMMAC). We also work with the Region's non-Registered Aboriginal Party Traditional Owner groups including Barapa Barapa, Tati Tati, Wadi Wadi, and Wamba Wamba.

We also support other DEECA regions in their leading of partnerships with Taungurung Land and Waters Council, Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation (YYNAC), Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation (WWWCHAC) and Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (BGLC).

Figure 1: Traditional Owner Countries in the Loddon Mallee region



The blue area includes Traditional Owner groups that are within the area, but is not an exact representation of Traditional Owner group locations/boundary lines.

Executive summary

In October 2022, major storms and floods impacted communities in 10 local government areas across the Loddon Mallee region. Nineteen Traditional Owner groups – five Recognised Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) and 14 non-Recognised Aboriginal Parties (non-RAPs) – were among those significantly affected.

During the recovery phase following the October 2022 event, Traditional Owner groups expressed a need to have a whole-of-government approach that would not only hear their concerns about healing Country, but one that would support self-determination. The Traditional Owner Flood Recovery Forum (the forum) was co-designed with Traditional Owners who developed the purpose and principles for the forum.

The aim of the forum was to build relationships and provide a coordinated approach for government agencies to listen to, and action, Traditional Owner groups' priorities for flood recovery and healing of Country in a way that supports self-determination.

In addition to the 13 attending Traditional Owner groups and DEECA staff, the forum hosted over 20 external government stakeholders. The forum provided an opportunity to hear the Traditional Owners' narrative of the flood, what it means to them and how agencies can partner with First Peoples to allow self-determination during recovery.

Agencies learnt about what was working well and what could be done to improve processes which would allow for meaningful partnerships based on mutual respect. The event increased awareness of the recovery priorities of Loddon Mallee's Traditional Owner groups, as well as individual agency accountabilities and responsibilities to ensure that flood recovery occurred in collaboration with Traditional Owners.

Key themes identified at the forum:

- 1 Partnerships** – Advocacy for the formation of meaningful partnerships between Traditional Owners and government agencies to empower and support Traditional Owner voices.
- 2 Cultural heritage protection** – Management and registration of Aboriginal cultural heritage, particularly areas where ancestral remains are located.
- 3 Continuation of cultural practices** – Cultural flows are important and Traditional Owners want to prepare the land to ensure it is healthy.
- 4 Access to land** – Traditional Owners to be present in and on Country. Changing procedures to enable Traditional Owners access to land to undertake site assessments before areas are reopened to the public.
- 5 Planning and policy** – Changes to existing emergency response and recovery policy and the co-creation of a new strategic plan to reflect narratives of Loddon Mallee Traditional Owner groups.
- 6 Funding** – Appropriate financial support is required to manage, plan, access and heal Country and people.
- 7 Embed Traditional Owners into the response from Incident Management Teams** – The need to create an emergency management strategy that includes Traditional Owners in the Incident Control Centre, in the discussions of levee planning, and empowers Traditional Owners to use their knowledge of Country in emergency decision making.

The forum was highly successful. It met its objectives of strengthening DEECA's relationships with Traditional Owner groups and helped facilitate their on-Country flood recovery through fostering self-determination. It also brought together many Traditional Owner groups and Victorian Government agencies to focus on self-determination. The forum provided valuable insights and opportunities to improve relationships between agencies and Traditional Owners.

Traditional Owner Flood Recovery Forum

The purpose of this report is to capture the views and concerns of Traditional Owners and to identify areas in which government agencies can improve and learn from the Traditional Owners about looking after Country during and after a flood.

This report will also be used to inform and enable decision making by government agencies and strengthen relationships with Traditional Owners in relation to flood events. The report also recommends actions and next steps and outlines a governance framework to demonstrate how accountability will be upheld in implementing these actions.

The event was coordinated by Loddon Mallee's Recovery Team, the Loddon Mallee Community and Partnerships Program team, and with support from the First People's Self Determination Division (FPSDD) in DEECA.

Introduction

A two-day forum in March 2023 was organised following requests from flood-impacted Traditional Owner groups in north-western Victoria.

The Traditional Owner Flood Recovery Forum (the forum) provided an opportunity to hear Traditional Owner aspirations and priorities in emergency recovery, with a focus on northern Victoria, so that government agencies could build them into future recovery efforts.

Thirteen Traditional Owner Groups and more than 20 agencies were represented over the two days.

Forum objective

The aim of the forum was to build relationships and provide a co-ordinated approach for government agencies to listen to, and action, Traditional Owner group priorities for flood recovery and healing of Country in a way that supports self-determination.

The forum was developed in collaboration with Loddon Mallee's Traditional Owners to create opportunities for Traditional Owners to connect with DEECA and other external government stakeholders to undertake flood recovery actions, such as:

- to listen and understand Traditional Owners' concerns and suggestions on effective flood recovery with a self-determination lens
- to identify gaps in policy and legislation
- to give Traditional Owners a space to voice concerns

Troy Benjamin MC (below left)
Photo credit: Tammy Nancuro
Wellbeing Officer, Kara Eddington
from Girraway Ganyi (below right).



Background

Heavy rainfall occurred across Victoria on 13 and 14 October 2022, with many catchments receiving two-day totals exceeding 200mm. This led to many major flood events including flash flooding in the upper catchments and riverine, and floodplain flooding over extended durations in the lower catchments.

As the region moved from flood response to recovery, accessibility issues reduced the ability to undertake assessments of Country and impacts to cultural heritage sites that occurred during the response.

Traditional Owners expressed frustration that they were constantly being engaged by different agencies at a time of extreme concern for Country. As a result, the forum was established and held on 30–31 March 2023.

The forum was co-designed with several Traditional Owners. Throughout the planning of the forum, Traditional Owners were able to provide feedback on the forum agenda. Through these conversations, Traditional Owners highlighted the importance of an on-Country visit.

DEECA staff engaged with agency representatives who identified a strong desire to participate in the forum, indicating the importance of building on relationships with their respective Traditional Owner groups.

Building cultural awareness and safety

The forum's success was greatly linked to the creation of a safe space, where Traditional Owners could be open about their concerns.

Agencies participated in a cultural safety briefing prior to Traditional Owners arriving, which helped to outline expectations of agency participation over the course of the forum.

Additionally, a wellbeing psychologist was engaged and on site for wellbeing support for all participants, and this support was appreciated by both Traditional Owners and agencies.

Finally, there was strong representation of First Nations peoples presenting at the forum, with 80 per cent of speakers, including the Master of Ceremonies and photographer identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders.

The forum was officially opened with a traditional Smoking Ceremony where attendees were encouraged to cleanse themselves and go into the forum with an open spirit. This was an important time to acknowledge the Elders that were in attendance, and to recognise the wisdom and knowledge that they hold for their Countries.

Preparing the traditional smoking ceremony and forum participants taking part.
Photo credits: Simone Egger (DEECA)



Traditional Owner aspirations

To understand the outcomes that the Traditional Owners wanted to take away from the forum, the first session was a facilitated opportunity to raise issues and concerns with government agencies regarding flood recovery. Key aspirations, quotes and issues that were raised are outlined following.

Traditional Owners yarning together about key issues raised in during the first day of the forum and their aspirations for Country.
Photo Credit: Tammy Nancuro

Aspirations

1. Commitment from government for Traditional Owners to write their own flood preparedness plan
2. Traditional Owners invited to visit public land after floods before they are opened to the public
3. Traditional Owner management of floods – dispossessed of being able to appreciate the healing of Country the floods bring
4. Acknowledge different narratives about floods
5. Legally binding changes to management through incorporating Aboriginal Lore into Emergency Management laws
6. Clarity about what agencies are putting on the table – what can be given back to Traditional Owners?
7. Resourcing for Traditional Owners to be on Country, caring for Country
8. Traditional Owners are primary knowledge holders of Country – they are best available science
9. Recognise us, listen, and respect us to prepare for the next flood
10. Partnerships are genuine not tokenistic
11. Protection of cultural sites
12. Improve process for the future – more First Nations people working to support emergency response



Round table discussion learnings

Rotating round table discussions were facilitated, based on advice from Traditional Owners, to provide an opportunity for Traditional Owners to directly connect with various agencies and discuss specific aspects or concerns relating to flood recovery.

This approach showed the importance of connection and collaboration and self-determined flood recovery planning. The structured timing of the table rotations was designed with flexibility to allow extra time for in-depth discussions as required. Discussions were captured into notes at each table and have been collated into a Register.

Actions have also been incorporated into the next steps section of this report, see page 12.

Presentations

First Nations presenters featured on day one of the forum, covering how Traditional Owners can be supported in flood recovery.

Tom Bell, Executive Director, and Curt Garwood, Director Aboriginal Engagement and Delivery, from DEECA's First Peoples Self-Determination Division, outlined the stages of the Traditional Owner flood recovery grant funding and the support that was available.

They emphasised that DEECA wanted to hear from Traditional Owners and the forum provided the opportunity to make sure their voices were heard.

Suzanne Coates, Manager Aboriginal Culture and Healing, from Emergency Recovery Victoria (ERV) spoke about the role of ERV in responding to the communities' needs and reinforced that Aboriginal culture and healing is included in all lines of recovery.

Suzanne asked attendees to undertake preparedness work prior to emergencies to reduce the need to be re-active in the future.

Forum participants taking part in round table discussions.
Photo credit: Simone Egger (DEECA)



Yarning circle

A Traditional Owner-only session provided the opportunity for open discussion with one another in a safe space. This was a very productive conversation where Traditional Owners spoke openly about how they could work together to heal Country.

Concurrently, agencies were able to connect and share concerns regarding flood recovery progress and how to be more engaged with Traditional Owners.

Following these sessions, attendees came back together and gathered into a large yarning circle and Traditional Owners were invited to share the key issues that had been raised earlier. This discussion was very powerful and respectful while reinforcing key issues that were raised on day one, helping to strengthen the key themes of the forum.

It also provided agencies an opportunity to respond to issues raised and clarify actions that needed to come from the forum.



Yarning circle where Elders spoke about their key issues and agencies responded and clarified actions needed.
Photo credits: Tammy Nancuro

“Sitting around tables was like school, but sitting in a yarning circle shows that you are ready to listen to us and work with us. We mean business in the yarning circle.”



Key themes

Throughout the forum, key themes emerged from discussions with Traditional Owners and agencies. They include:

Strengthening partnerships between agencies and Traditional Owner groups

- Advocacy for the formation of meaningful partnerships between Traditional Owners and agencies to empower and support Traditional Owners.

"If you want to care for Country, you need to put people out there that care for Country."

"You have all the resources. Our knowledge and expertise is unmatched, but you have the resources. We need to be involved every step of the way; we want to be."

Ensuring cultural heritage protection

- Cultural heritage protection through management and registration of Aboriginal cultural heritage, particularly in areas where ancestral remains are located. Strengthening policy around this protection and funding Traditional Owner groups to undertake this work on Country.

"A lot of our cultural sites have been destroyed over time. I find it concerning that they aren't being protected."

Continuation of cultural practices

- Cultural flows are important and Traditional Owners want to prepare the land to ensure it is healthy.

"Water has a memory. It will always go back to where it has always gone."

Access to Country for cultural heritage assessments

- Changing procedures to enable Traditional Owners to access land to undertake site assessments before areas are reopened to the public.

"Disappointing to see after floods receded that national and state parks were opened to public. Traditional Owners should be invited into the parks to inspect the properties, provide our own assessments, and see what was destroyed. We should have been asked first before it was opened to the public."

"We needed to see our cultural heritage and ancestors and our Country."

Advocacy for planning and policies to embed Traditional Owner knowledge

- Changes to existing policy and the co-creation of a new policy are needed to reflect narratives of different Traditional Owner groups.

"We used to wait for the floods, we used to swim in the floods, it brought so much new life. You mob don't see what the big picture is. The weirs are almost full again, all that water is headed down here, it's the coordinated attack with manmade weirs."

Access to long term funding

- Government resources for appropriate funding support to manage, plan, access and heal Country and its peoples.

"We should have funding then for our mobs for river rangers to go down. We should get to go in with you...create these positions. It should be us in there – that's our caretaker responsibility."

"We have people in here with years (of) experience, we should be teaching you...We are the caretakers of Country first."

Amendments to policies relating to emergency management

- The need to create an emergency management strategy that uses Traditional Owner knowledge of Country in emergency response decision making.

"Mob know their rivers...we need the resources up front, so we can do our plans and what we need to do. We need government to simplify things. Want government to step up and walk the water walk/ talk with us. Talk simple and straight out with us."

Uncle Brendan Kennedy and Stephen Korp (DEECA Loddon Mallee – Program Manager Aboriginal Partnerships) (right)
Photo credit: Tammy Nancuro



Evaluation approach

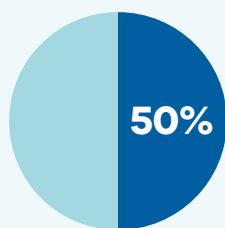
After the forum all attendees were asked to evaluate the impact and usefulness of the forum. There was a formal evaluation process, via surveys that were sent to Traditional Owners and agencies, and feedback was also collated during conversations post-forum with Traditional Owners and agency representatives.

In May (two months after the forum), agencies were invited to a forum debrief during which further feedback was collated and the actions register was further defined and allocated.

Evaluation findings

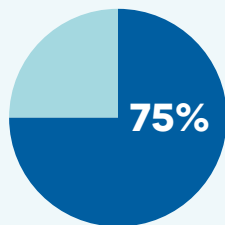
Most of the feedback has been underpinned by the importance of holding regular forums such as this one, to enable Traditional Owner voices in flood recovery, and ensure that agencies are connecting with Traditional Owners throughout their projects.

Key survey results:



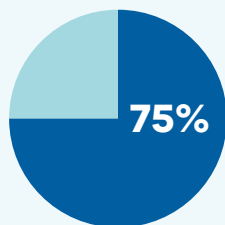
50% of Traditional Owners felt that the Forum was **very effective** in supporting their self-determination through flood recovery planning.

■ Very Effective
■ Somewhat Effective



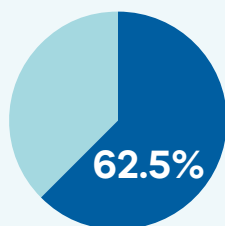
75% of Traditional Owners indicated that they felt **very comfortable** to share their ideas, values and priorities for flood recovery during the Forum.

■ Very Comfortable
■ Somewhat Comfortable



75% of Traditional Owners indicated that they felt **very satisfied** that their perspective was listened to during the Forum.

■ Satisfied
■ Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied



62.5% of Agencies believed that their Overall Experience of the Flood Recovery Forum was **excellent**.

■ Excellent
■ Good

Reflections from attendees

The Traditional Owner groups that attended the forum came with the hope of being able to work with government and agencies, and to be part of the decision-making process to ensure recovery in the future was proactive rather than reactive.

Traditional Owners from Victoria's north-west said their ancestors had a deep, ecological understanding of how to look after the land and that knowledge had been passed down from generation to generation by their Elders. Aboriginal communities have looked after and lived along these waterways for centuries.

One Elder said the forum provided an opportunity for Traditional Owners to get together in the one room with government and other agencies to discuss the impacts of floods on Country and how they can all work together.

"It was done in a way that was respectful. There wasn't any pushback from government."

He said Traditional Owners want to be part of the discussion from the start of the process – the initial response to an emergency, such as a flood – and to have systems in place to ensure the impact on Country was lessened in future.

"Taking the time to hear what we are saying from our lens. We have thought about this for a long time."

The response from agency staff at the forum was also positive. They welcomed the opportunity to speak face-to-face with Traditional Owners – both RAPs and non-RAPs.

One agency staff member said it was a valuable experience:

"I'm happy that I came. It's been particularly valuable to make connections with Traditional Owners who don't have a RAP structure."

Other agency staff agreed:

"Considering the feedback we heard, we are better equipped to work on preparedness."

Elder Brendan Kennedy looking at an information board at Little Murray Weir (below left).

Photo credit: Tammy Nancuro

Post-forum Cultural heritage assessments with Traditional Owners along the Murray River (below right).

Photo credit: Stephanie Rowe (DEECA)



Recommended next steps

To continue to embed outcomes from the forum with all participating government agencies, a working group will be formed, supported by a Terms of Reference. This working group will support agencies to work collaboratively to address what we heard at the forum and maintain oversight of further outcomes as appropriate.

DEECA Loddon Mallee Community and Partnerships Program team will support this working group and regularly update Traditional Owners of progress toward actions.

DEECA action table

The table below identifies the key actions identified at the forum that are within DEECA's portfolio responsibilities.

Theme	Action	Linked aspiration	Timeframe
1. Continuous engagement and partnerships with Traditional Owners – advocacy for the formation of meaningful partnerships between Traditional Owners and government agencies to empower and support Traditional Owner voices.	DEECA to send out contact list of Traditional Owners and contacts of the key agency representatives to enable greater connection between Traditional Owners and agencies.	10	September 2023 – December 2023
	DEECA will chair the monthly agency working group and continue to reinforce the importance of completing the forum actions.	6, 10	July 2023 – June 2024
	Building DEECA staff awareness around cultural safety and that some words used throughout emergencies can have negative connotations to First Peoples.	4, 10	Ongoing
2. Aboriginal cultural heritage protection – management and registration of Aboriginal cultural heritage, particularly areas where ancestral remains are located.	Creating opportunities to walk on Country with Traditional Owners to locate, assess and protect Aboriginal cultural heritage in state forests in Loddon Mallee region.	2, 11	June 2023
	Ensure Aboriginal cultural heritage is appropriately managed and protected in state forests in Loddon Mallee region as part of recovery programs.	11	Ongoing
	Reviewing temporary levees operational policies and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) to ensure that levees constructed in emergency minimise harm to Aboriginal cultural heritage values.	11, 3	Ongoing
3. Continuation of cultural practices – cultural flows are important and Traditional Owners want to prepare the land to ensure it is healthy.	Share findings with Traditional Owners of work with Catchment Management Authorities (CMA) to map levees – permanent, temporary and historical levees on private and public land to inform floodplain management.	9, 3, 8	July 2023 – June 2025
	Operational works to remediate temporary levees on public and private land constructed during the event following strategic flood plain management decisions.	11, 3	TBD
	Consider cultural burns to reduce weeds and vegetation to decrease black water events.	6, 9	Ongoing
	Communicate Joint Fuel Management Plan processes and support Traditional Owners in nominating cultural burns for this program.	6, 7, 8, 9	July 2023 – June 2024

Theme	Action	Linked aspiration	Timeframe
4. Access to land – Traditional Owners to be present in and on Country. Changing procedures to enable Traditional Owners access to land to undertake site assessments before areas are reopened to the public.	Forest Fire Management has used an exemption under the Public Safety Zone for state forest to enable Traditional Owners to do cultural assessments at Benwell & Guttrum state forests before opening public land to the public. DEECA will investigate implementing this process statewide for future events.	2, 5	December 2023
5. Planning and policy – Changes to existing emergency response and recovery policy and the co-creation of a new strategic plan to reflect narratives of Loddon Mallee Traditional Owner groups.	Traditional Owners to be provided with information, resources and leadership development opportunities to build their emergency management awareness to influence future change.	6, 12	Ongoing
	Embedding Traditional Owner narrative in relation to natural events and emergency management incidents.	4, 8, 12	Ongoing
	Investigate ways to direct flood water on the landscape to places where water can be used beneficially.	3, 8	Ongoing
6. Funding – Appropriate financial support is required to manage, plan, access and heal Country and people.	Provide flood recovery funding for Traditional Owners to self-determine on Country following the October 2022 event.	6, 7	June 2023
	Advocate for cross-departmental recovery funding to be streamlined to improve funding access for Traditional Owner groups.	6, 7, 10	Ongoing
7. Embed Traditional Owners into emergency response – The creation of an emergency management strategy that includes Traditional Owners in the Incident Control Centre, in the discussions of levee planning and empowers Traditional Owners to use their knowledge of Country in emergency decision making.	Identify ways to embed Traditional Owners' voices, knowledge and advice into the IMTs to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage areas from being impacted.	8, 10, 12	Ongoing
	Implement Traditional Owners' aspirations in this report into DEECA response prior to emergency events in Loddon Mallee.	1, 3, 8, 12	Ongoing

The forum highlighted additional actions for other participating agencies to complete to further support self-determination in flood recovery, these actions are reported on throughout the working group meetings.

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