

## Media Statement

12 April 2024

# Victorian Government must commit to Aboriginal-owned water title for Murray-Darling Basin

The Victorian Government must give effect to Traditional Owners' rights to water and guarantee Aboriginal-owned water title in order to stake its claim as a nation-leading environmental manager, says the state-wide body that advocates for the rights and interests of Victorian Traditional Owner groups.

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations urges the Victorian Government to prioritise Traditional Owners' authority as water rights-holders and the Government's own commitments within the revised National Water Initiative, under the national Closing the Gap Agreement, and as it negotiates Murray-Darling Basin Plan projects – four of which were yesterday funded by the Commonwealth Government after previously being withheld due to the state's opposition to water license buybacks.

Federation CEO Paul Paton says Traditional Owners' role as rights-holders and equal partners to Government must be uplifted in balancing the environmental, economic, and social considerations of Murray-Darling water management – an acknowledgement of autonomy that will deliver the best outcomes for all communities.

"If the Victorian Government is serious about self-determination, it will recognise the primacy of Traditional Owners' and their rights to water including through acknowledging the need for water entitlements to be held by Traditional Owner corporations," he says.

"The Closing the Gap targets for increasing our legal rights to land are recognition of the vital connection between land, water and wellbeing. These targets will ensure Traditional Owners' knowledge and expertise is applied to the Country we've cared for over thousands of years and represent a critical act of self-determination that will ensure our precious resources remain protected and managed for generations to come."

The Federation previously provided feedback to the Victorian Government's landmark [Water Is Life](#) strategy for returning water entitlements to Traditional Owners, urging the Government to recognise the authority of Traditional Owners as rights-holders to water – not merely stakeholders to be consulted – and to establish formal partnership to transition water ownership and management to Traditional Owners.

"*Water Is Life* shows the pathway forward and makes clear there is no time to lose," says Mr Paton.

"The Victorian Government says it has done the most in Australia to return water to the environment. This only matters if the Government recognises and respects Traditional Owners' rights to access and manage water, as we have done for millenia."

– ENDS –

## About the Federation

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations is the Victorian state-wide body that convenes and advocates for the rights of Traditional Owner groups while progressing wider social, economic, environmental and cultural objectives. It was established in 2013 by Traditional Owner Corporations who recognised they could be stronger together and advance their shared interests in policy engagement, economic opportunity and caring for Country.

**Media enquiries** – Sophie Raynor, 0434 578 933 or [sophie.raynor@fvtoc.com.au](mailto:sophie.raynor@fvtoc.com.au)