

Water

The forests of the West RFA region are an important source of water for agricultural, industrial, domestic uses and have significant ecological, heritage, tourism and recreation values. The maintenance of water quality and production on public land is an important consideration of RFA development.

Surface water

The West region covers sections of 16 river basins, which are predominantly private land with low levels of forest cover. Surface water flows from eight rivers into 20 large lakes and reservoirs in the region as well as into large reservoirs outside the region. The Otway Coast basin has the best quality surface water and is an important source of domestic water for extensive areas of the south-west including Geelong and Warrnambool. Water quality is generally poorer in the lower reaches of most major rivers with nutrient inputs from agriculture and urban development, riverbank erosion and reduced flows caused by pumping for irrigation.

Ground water

The West region lies within the Highlands, Murray, Otway and Port Phillip ground water provinces which have numerous aquifer systems with considerable variations in the depths, yields and salinities of the different formations.

Ground water is important for domestic and agricultural purposes in many large and small towns through out the region. Ground water from the Highland province is mineralised in the Hepburn Springs-Daylesford area, providing a regional tourist attraction and some 30 megalitres (million litres) of bottled mineral water each year.

Forest Management

The forest management planning process is the primary mechanism to ensure maintenance of water quality and yield from State forests. Objectives for forest management include maintaining biological values; ensuring water quality is suitable for current and likely future use; and maintaining water yields for domestic and agricultural use. Forest Management Plans prepared by the Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment include guidelines and actions to prevent soil erosion and stream sedimentation and to protect water yield.

In preparing Forest Management Plans NRE must consider a range of legislation and policies including the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* and the *Heritage Rivers Act 1992*. Issues for consideration include coupe planning and design, roads, fire and other forest uses including recreation and extractive activities.

Forest management plans are in place for the Otway and Midlands FMAs. Until plans are developed for the Portland and Horsham FMAs, they will be subject to the Code of Forest Practice, Forest Management Prescriptions and Special Area Plans to ensure the maintenance of water quality and yield.