

# **LOWER VASSE RIVER MANAGEMENT ADVISORY GROUP COMMUNIQUE**

## *(POST MEETINGS OF 2 AND 16 NOVEMBER 2021)*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The City's Lower Vasse River Management Advisory Group (LVRMAG) met again on Tuesday, 2 November 2021 and Tuesday, 16 November 2021. A range of matters of interest to the community were addressed at the meeting, including:

- updates on the planned commencement of sediment removal works this coming summer/autumn;
- information on a potential Phoslock trial in the Lower Vasse River in a future summer by the Department of Water & Environmental Regulation (DWER);
- information about the planned management of the Vasse Estuary Storm Surge Barrier this summer, and how that may affect the Lower Vasse River;
- further discussion of potential human health impacts associated with blue green algal blooms in the River; and
- future communication and consultation by the City and the Group, about the Lower Vasse River.

Brief summaries of key points related to each of these matters are provided below.

Following the recent Council elections, the Group has also welcomed two new members, in Cr Anne Ryan and Cr Jodie Richards. Along with Cr Sue Riccelli, Crs Ryan and Richards are now the Councillor representatives on the Group, with Cr Kate Cox and Cr Mikayla Love available to act as deputies when required.

### **2.0 Sediment removal**

Members were advised that tenders to undertake stage 1 of the sediment removal works have now closed, and tender submissions are currently being assessed. A preferred tenderer has now been identified and it is envisaged that the tender will be awarded by early December. To coincide with when the preferred tenderer is available to undertake the works, it is expected that works will commence in March or April 2022.

The area identified for stage 1 is the area between the Butter Factory and Causeway Road Bridge, and immediately upstream of the bridge. The decision to prioritise that area was made by the City earlier in the year, having sought and considered feedback from the Group. The Group had identified sediment removal as its highest priority action, to be implemented in the whole length of the River between the Butter Factory and the Busselton Bypass.

Some members would have preferred that sediment removal occur in the entire length of the River from the Butter Factory to the Busselton Bypass in a single stage this summer/autumn, but for a range of reasons that has not been possible. Members are, however, keen to ensure that further stages occur as soon as possible, for the entire length of the River from the Butter Factory to the Busselton Bypass.

There are various important reasons for the area between the Butter Factory and Causeway Road Bridge being chosen for stage 1. This area is highly visible and there is a relatively high level of activity in the vicinity. Also, whilst there are variations from year to year, algal blooms tend to start the earliest

and become most concentrated in this area. At the time funding applications needed to be lodged, the City also did not have sufficient background information to cost or seek environmental approvals for sediment removal in other sections of the River.

Additionally, due to the volume of sediment that needs to be removed, a large area is required to accommodate the geo-textile bags that are likely to be required for the removed sediment, and they need to remain in place for several months before the sediment can be transported. The only suitable location for placement of the bags to dredge the lower section is Rotary Park, which may be revamped in the future, making the space unavailable.

Unfortunately, members were also advised that the second grant funding application that had been submitted for sediment removal, with the State Natural Resource Management Programme, had not been successful. As the first grant application, through the State's Healthy Estuaries Initiative funding programme was successful (\$350,000), and the Council has also agreed to allocate additional funds (\$260,000), it should still be possible to make a substantial start on the sediment removal work this summer.

Work to obtain environmental and heritage approvals for sediment removal, for the section of the River between the Butter factory and the Busselton Outer Bypass has also been progressed, and it is envisaged that approvals will be granted by December. Subject to approvals being granted, additional funding being secured, and an assessment of any learnings from stage 1, it is envisaged that further stages of sediment removal will occur in future years, possibly as early as next summer.

Whilst it is considered that sediment removal will be necessary to address water quality problems in much of the River, due to the complexity of the issues, sediment removal on its own will not be sufficient to the problems. Other strategies will also be needed to achieve significant improvements in summertime water quality in the River.

### **3.0 Phoslock trial**

Phoslock is a phosphorus-binding manufactured clay product that has been shown to significantly improve water quality in waterways like the Lower Vasse River, including through small-scale trials in the River itself in the past. Use of Phoslock could be an important strategy to complement other water quality improvement strategies, including sediment removal. Through the State's Healthy Estuaries Initiative funding programme, DWER has been able to allocate funds to undertake a large-scale Phoslock trial in the River. The trial will not be undertaken this coming summer, however, and DWER will consult further with the Group and other stakeholders before making firm decisions about when, where and how to undertake the trial.

### **4.0 Management of the Vasse Estuary Storm Surge Barrier**

Management of the Vasse Estuary Storm Surge Barrier is coordinated through the Vasse-Wonnerup Wetlands Partnership (Partnership), which is led by DWER, but also includes: the City of Busselton; Water Corporation; Department of Biodiversity, Conservation & Attractions (DBCA); and Department of Primary Industries & Regional Development (DPIRD). Management of water flows through the Barrier can have significant implications for a number of very important matters, including: waterbird habitat and numbers; flooding risk for the Busselton townsite; the risk of fish kills occurring in the Vasse Estuary Channel; and the amenity of residents living in the Estuary View Drive area in Wonnerup.

Over the last few years, a number of different approaches to managing the Barrier have been trialled and assessed. Last summer, the Barrier was managed so that water levels were slightly higher than in most previous years. That reduced the risk of fish kills in the Inlet Channel, and resulted in better amenity for residents living in the Estuary View Drive area. It also, unfortunately, contributed to the

ingress of salt water into the Lower Vasse River in Autumn, which resulted in the deaths of Carters Freshwater Mussels. In addition, it is thought to have contributed to reduced waterbird numbers in the Vasse Estuary –noting that the Estuary is a major component of the Ramsar-listed Vasse-Wonnerup Wetlands System, which is internationally recognised habitat for migratory waterbirds, protected by Federal environmental legislation.

Over the coming summer, the Partnership has agreed to an approach that would see slightly lower levels in general, significantly reducing the risk of salt water ingress into the Lower Vasse River, and improved conditions for waterbirds in the Vasse Estuary. The Vasse-Wonnerup Wetlands, however, are a complex system, highly sensitive to small changes in weather and tidal conditions, and management of water levels and other factors can be very challenging at times.

In the summer of 2021/22, the Partnership has proposed to allow salt water inflow only when there are signs of poor water quality in the Vasse Estuary Channel. Seawater inflow will only occur until the water in the Vasse channel is brackish, and will cease when water levels reach 0.1m AHD. This will allow for water levels to remain lower for a longer period. The proposal is subject to approval by DBCA.

### **5.0 Potential human health impacts associated with blue green algal blooms in the River**

Following up on earlier discussions on the topic, the Department of Health (DoH) provided responses to questions that had been asked by members. DoH provide advice to the City about potential human health impacts, and how those impacts may be appropriately managed, and the City acts on the DoH advice. Principally, that involves the placement of signage around the River, warning against contact with the River during the summer, when blue green algal blooms are often present. It also involves advising against the running of fountains or anything else that may create the risk of blue green algae being spread through the air.

Group members have expressed concerns that some potential human health risks are not fully understood, and require further consideration. As a result, the Group is looking to receive a briefing from an independent expert in the field at a future meeting.

### **6.0 Future communication and consultation**

The Group also discussed future communication and consultation with the community about the matters discussed by the Group, and matters related to the River more broadly. The City will continue to include summaries of the issues discussed at Group meetings in the monthly 'Bay-to-Bay' electronic newsletter, as well as posting key information to Facebook. The City will also look to provide brief summaries of matters discussed by the Group in the 'City Connect' pages published in local newspapers. Subject to further discussion with the Group, a public forum on the River is expected to be organised in early 2022 (most likely February or March). Community groups have offered to distribute this communicate as well.

Group members and members of the public can also find information relating to the River and its management on the City and Revitalising Geographe Waterways websites, via the following links –

- [Wetlands and Waterways » City of Busselton](#)
- [Lower Vasse River - RGW \(dwer.wa.gov.au\)](http://dwer.wa.gov.au)

These links may also be useful -

- Sediment removal FAQs available at [lower-vasse-river-sediment-removal-faqs \(busselton.wa.gov.au\)](http://busselton.wa.gov.au)

- [Living Streams FAQs](#) [FAQs | Waterway Management | Your Say Busselton](#)
- LVR FAQs available at [FAQs - Lower Vasses River - RGW \(dwer.wa.gov.au\)](#)

Members of the community can also contact the City if they have questions about the management of the River.