
NVIRP's Revised Connections Program

Objectives

The Strategic Connections Program is a revised approach to implementing NVIRP's Connections Program. The existing Program involves connecting irrigators to a modernised main system of irrigation channels or 'backbone', consolidating supply point connections and giving customers access to improved water delivery services.

This revised delivery framework is being established to allow irrigation water customers in the GMID that are not on the backbone an active role in generating ideas and making decisions about their future water supply. The landholder-based structure for the Strategic Connections Program, with landowner steering committees, will assist NVIRP in understanding the needs, wants and expectations of customers in the project area. The process for customers located directly on the backbone will remain unchanged.

The establishment of an Independent Review Panel will give all customers, backbone and non-backbone, the opportunity to seek a review of decisions made by NVIRP.

New Strategic Connections Program Process

Each Strategic Connections Project (SCP) is a specific channel system supplying a number of landowners, generally between 25 and 40, although could be as little as 8 and as large as 200 in SCPs close to regional cities (e.g. Swan Hill).

Landholders will elect a committee to represent the group; committees will consist of up to eight voluntary members. Each landowner steering committee will work with a farm irrigation designer to develop a plan to modernise the channel system and advise NVIRP on aspects of modernisation and landholder expectations and issues

This revised delivery framework will:

- Ensure community driven outcomes are achieved;
- Promote greater transparency and consistency for the rollout of the Connections Program;
- Ensure required and agreed outcomes are achieved in a safe and compliant manner; and
- Result in enhanced landowner ownership of the developed solutions.

While the activities of these farmer-led committees will be adapted for each local modernisation project, all committees will share these features:

- A strong local contribution to the design of the new system;
- Access to resources and expertise to get the job done;
- Open consultation and communication with landholders, with appropriate regard for privacy and conflict of interest requirements;
- A well-defined, consistently applied process which offers certainty about timing; and
- Support from existing modernisation committees.

This revised framework must work within the bounds of NVIRP requirements and commitments to the Victorian and Commonwealth Government in relation to budgets, water recovery and timelines.

Roles and Responsibilities for Strategic Connection Projects (SCP)

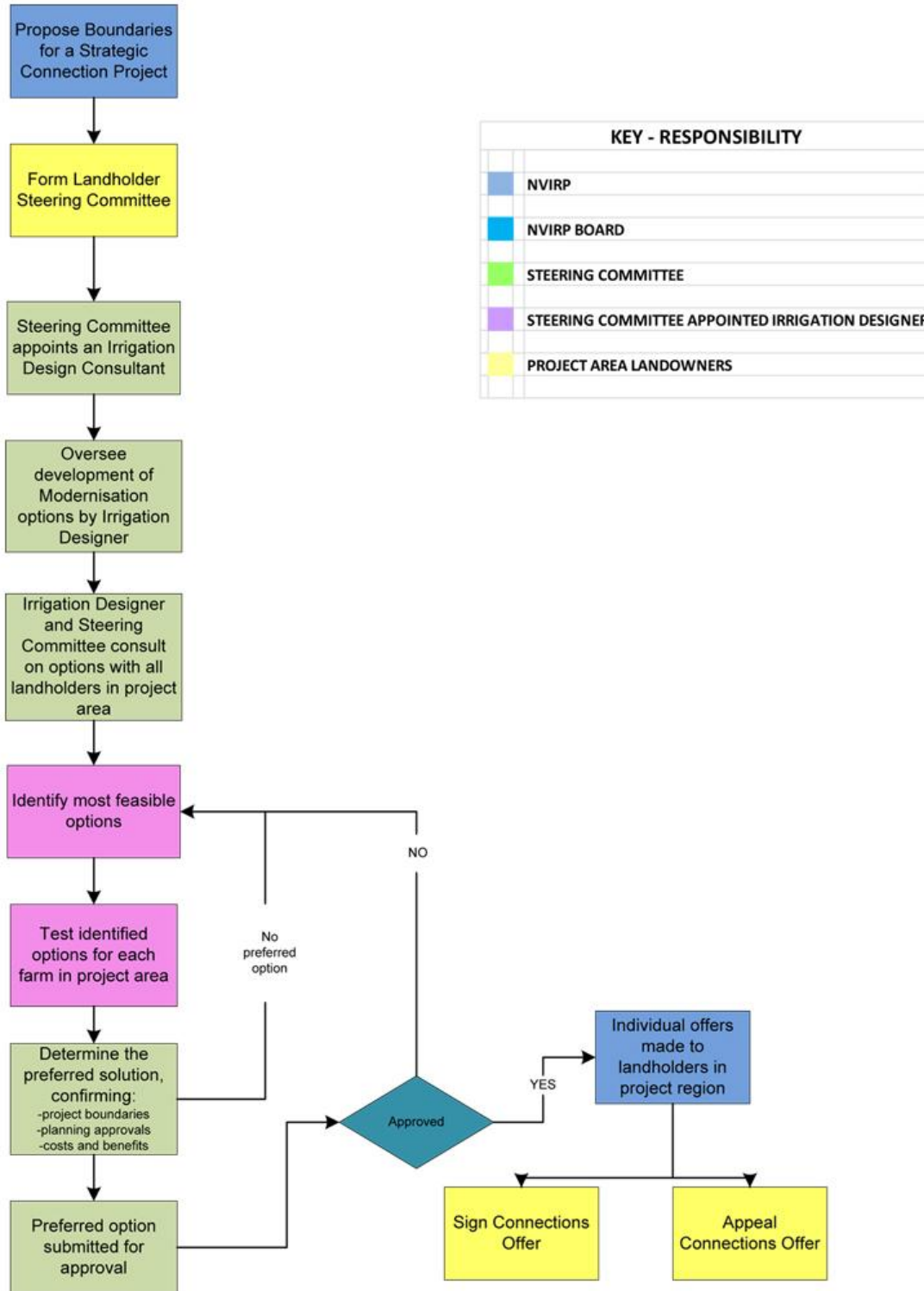
The following table outlines the roles and responsibilities of the different entities associated with the Strategic Connections Program:

Entity	Responsibility in Strategic Connections Projects
Landholder	<p>Landholders will receive information about the process and objectives for the program and elect a Strategic Connection Steering Committee</p> <p>Participate in the SCP design process through consultation with the irrigation designer and receive a final concept plan before submission to NVIRP.</p> <p>Landholders will sign their individual connections agreement or have the ability to appeal the offer. Landowners may also reject an offer and chose not to appeal.</p>
Strategic Connection Steering Committee*	<p>The Committee will appoint a farm designer, chosen from a panel, who will develop the irrigation modernisation plan.</p> <p>The Committee will provide advice on the expectations and needs of relevant landholders, to the appointed farm designer, to develop a concept plan for the strategic connections project for approval by NVIRP. In preparing the SCP the committee will oversee the community consultation process required to engage with all affected landholders, with support from NVIRP.</p>
Steering Committee Appointed Irrigation Designer	<p>Chosen from a panel of farm designers, the appointed designer is responsible for undertaking landholder consultation and farm irrigation assessments, to develop a concept plan, with input and advice from the Steering Committee, for final referral back to all landholders.</p>
NVIRP Staff	<p>To provide support to the community appointed Strategic Connection Steering Committee, consistent with the requirements of the Board.</p> <p>NVIRP will be responsible for the delivery of all connections works, including the appointment of a Project Manager/s in consultation with the Steering Committee.</p>
Project Manager	<p>The appointed project manager undertakes oversight of the on-farm works that will be carried out on landholders' properties, as a result of the approved SCP.</p>
Modernisation Consultative Committee	<p>To, in conjunction with NVIRP, advise the Steering Committee of the parameters for each SCP (i.e. extent of the backbone, etc).</p>
Independent Review Panel	<p>To hear appeals from landholders in relation to their individual connections offer (see <i>Terms of Reference – Independent Review Panel</i> for further information).</p>
NVIRP Board	<p>To approve the Strategic Connection Program model, and sign off on the preferred strategic connections option submitted by each Steering Committee ensuring consistency with the obligations/requirements of the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments.</p>

* See the Steering Committee Charter for further information.

The Model for Strategic Connection Projects

This flowchart demonstrates the delivery model for SCPs.



NVIRP Independent Review Panel

An Independent Review Panel, set up for the entire NVIRP Program, will give landowners involved in SCP's the opportunity to seek an independent review of decisions taken by NVIRP which impact on them.

The Independent Review Panel will:

- Scrutinise and independently review decisions made by NVIRP;
- Have at least three members, drawn from a pool of people with significant expertise in areas including irrigation modernisation, community engagement, and law and public administration;
- Operate at arms-length from NVIRP and hear an appeal when NVIRP and a landholder cannot reach agreement on a decision related to carrying out works, or an incentive/benefit under a modernisation project;
- Operate without legal formalities so it is accessible and make decisions within a specific length of time; and
- Make a recommendation to NVIRP's CEO, who will make a final decision after considering the recommendation.

Decisions by the panel, and final determinations by NVIRP's CEO, will not affect other rights or options, such as recourse to legal action.

For further information refer to the Terms of Reference (Attachment 1).

Other relevant processes

The modernisation of the GMID provides the opportunity for major reform of irrigation systems and services that will provide benefits to the entire irrigation community. The need for community engagement in this process is critical but there may come a time when decisions are required to be made and funded by the Victorian Government for the entire community through the form of compulsory reconfiguration.

This process would only occur when all options have been exhausted, the community and individuals have had the opportunity to present their views including through mediation and appeals, and undertaken in accordance with relevant legislation and any conditions in project funding agreements. These processes are being put in place to ensure that any fair and reasonable views from the community and individuals are considered.