



Diversions to morass

Allegations of illegal water transfer

Jessica Bennett

WATER has been diverted from the Latrobe River into the Heart Morass in an attempt to prevent the wetland from becoming acidic.

Southern Rural Water has confirmed water was diverted from the Latrobe River into the Heart Morass, and is now investigating whether or not it was done illegally.

The Coalition Against Duck Shooting alleges water was illegally diverted from the river into the morass by Sale Field and Game Association, which owns the wetland.

According to coalition campaign director Laurie Levy, CADS members had entered the morass and they believed two water locks were diverting water from the Latrobe River into the wetland.

"At a time when the numbers of native waterbirds in Victoria are down by 60 per cent from last year, and when the vast majority of wetlands in the state are dry, over 1000 native waterbirds ... have

already sought refuge on this private wetland," Mr Levy said.

"These birds will become the proverbial 'sitting ducks' for Field and Game Australia members on the opening of the duck shooting season."

However Sale Field and Game Association has defended the diversion, saying it was in the interest of protecting and maintaining the health of the Heart Morass.

Association spokesman Gary Howard said the residual water at the morass was of "very poor quality" and detrimental to the wetland's ecosystem.

"The issue is the wetland was drying out," he said.

"Salinity is skyrocketing and the PH level was below three — which makes the water almost like acid."

According to Mr Howard, association members had spent three years rehabilitating the morass and if fresh water did not flow into it, their work would have been ruined.

"(The association) has been working tirelessly down there over the last three years," he said.

"A lot of planning and work was

involved in the rehabilitation and it was all going to be destroyed.

"We would have gone backwards in our attempts to dilute the salinity of the water and elevate the PH level (if nothing was done)."

Mr Howard said while the total effects of the water diversion were not yet known, it would no doubt have a "beneficial bearing".

"We were monitoring the quality of the water going in (to the morass) for the five days," he said.

Southern Rural Water's Groundwater and Rivers manager Craig Parker said SRW was currently investigating the allegation.

"(Which includes) interviewing the land owner and inspecting the land for evidence," he said.

"We will then make a decision about whether or not an offence has been committed."

Mr Parker said if water had been diverted illegally, one of Southern Rural Water's options would be to prosecute under the Victorian Water Act 1989, which could include a penalty of \$1000 and gaol.



Sale Field and Game spokesman Gary Howard at the Heart Morass. Allegations have been made by The Coalition Against Duck Shooting of an illegal diversion of water from the Latrobe River into the morass. - File photo