



Australian Government

Department of Climate Change, Energy,
the Environment and Water

THE COORONG, LOWER LAKES AND MURRAY MOUTH (CLLMM) RESEARCH CENTRE SCIENCE PROGRAM

Mid-Term Review

August 2025



Purpose

In October 2022, the Australian Government announced the Goyder Institute for Water Research will receive \$8 million between 2022-26 to support, via research and community engagement, the management of the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth (CLLMM) and the critical environmental, cultural, social and economic values for the region into the future.

The intended outcomes of the grant are:

- Long-term prosperity of the CLLMM region through locally based research that empowers community and First Nations to participate and lead in cultural and scientific activities
- Establish the CLLMM region as a world-leader in the creation, integration and adoption of the scientific knowledge of First Nations, communities, governments and researchers for the sustainable management of wetlands
- Desired environmental outcomes of the Basin Plan are achieved, and international obligations are met.

The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) undertook a mid-term review of the Program to gather insights and reflections from its participants and stakeholders. The review included a series of short questions using Likert scales and opportunity for open-ended comments. The review was sent to the Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal Corporation (NAC), Goyder Institute for Water Research Management Board, Research Advisory Committee (RAC) and the Research Centre Advisory Forum (RCAF) for participation.

This feedback is valuable in helping to understand what has worked well, what can be improved, and how to ensure the Program continues to meet the needs of its participants and stakeholders.

What we heard (findings)

- 94% of participants agree or strongly agree that the CLLMM Research Centre Science Program has provided valuable content, experiences and/or outcomes.
- 89% of respondents find it extremely important for the CLLMM Research Centre to continue developing and maintain its presence in the future.
 - The remaining respondents find it very important
- 68% of respondents rated the Program's content and outputs as extremely relevant to their current or future work.
- 94% of respondents believe the CLLMM Research Centre has been very successful or extremely successful in building collaborative knowledge across sectors.
- "We are past the 11th hour... continuing the presence of the research centre is critical."
- "CLLMM provided a platform to facilitate regular interaction between projects/scientists who otherwise might have worked in isolation."
- "The Centre acts as a neutral convener, creating opportunities for dialogue and relationship-building across sectors."

- “The Centre has been extremely successful in co-designing research with First Nations custodians, evident in joint field days, culturally centred workshops, and Ngarrindjeri fieldwork guidance. These initiatives have built trust while linking community priorities with academic and government objectives, creating a genuinely collaborative knowledge-building platform.”
- “The Centre’s location in the region is important and provides a strong connection to the community.”
- “Research to address management needs for the CLLMM will need to continue into the future to address impacts of climate change and management changes affecting this important ecosystem.”
- “I believe that this has been CLLMM RC’s highest achievement to-date...to build trust and bring together the Ngarrindjeri First Nations and vast variety of community groups in the CLLMM area along with researchers and government to work cooperatively together to achieve a common goal of improving our knowledge of our local environment.”
- “I’ve seen the program actively encourage collaboration through joint workshops, inclusion of cultural perspectives in research, and consistent efforts to centre First Nations voices in decision-making processes. These efforts have helped foster stronger, more meaningful linkages across sectors.”
- “The Coorong is extremely vulnerable and we need to understand how it will change in the future and what can be done to assist a transition to whatever the system will look like under climate change.”
- “The CLLMM Research Centre has been invaluable for the local community. People feel heard, and their knowledge and ideas have been incorporated, where they are largely missed elsewhere.”
- “A sustained CLLMM Research Centre is critical for long-term ecological baselining and adaptive management as climate and water-allocation pressures intensify.”

The mid-term review of the CLLMM Research Centre Science Program reveals overwhelmingly positive sentiment across stakeholders. Most respondents rated the program as either “Very” or “Extremely” successful, relevant, and important. Common themes include the value of First Nations collaboration, community engagement, and the integration of science with local knowledge. Respondents praised the Centre’s role in fostering trust, building partnerships, and addressing climate and ecological challenges. A few responses offered constructive critique, suggesting clearer strategic direction and stronger coordination. Overall, the Centre is seen as a vital and inclusive platform for environmental research and governance.

Detailed Findings

KEQ1 – To what extent do you agree that the CLLMM Research Centre Science Program has provided valuable content, experiences and/or outcomes?

Likert Scale Summary:

- Strongly agree: 68.4%
- Agree: 26.3%
- Neutral: 5.3%
- Disagree/Strongly disagree: 0%

Participants overwhelmingly value the Program's content and outcomes. Many highlighted the integration of First Nations perspectives, community knowledge, and ecological science. The Centre's role in breaking down silos and fostering collaboration was repeatedly praised. Respondents noted that the Centre has created meaningful partnerships and delivered relevant local research. Some acknowledge that while the full value is yet to be realised, the trajectory is promising.

KEQ2 – How relevant is the CLLMM Research Centre Science Program's content and outputs to your current/future work, practice or context?

Likert Scale Summary:

- Extremely relevant: 68.4%
- Very relevant: 26.3%
- Moderately relevant: 0%
- Slightly relevant: 5.3%
- Not at all relevant: 0%

The Program's outputs are seen as highly applicable to local management, policy development, and scientific research. Respondents mentioned using the data for climate adaptation, ecosystem planning, and community engagement. Several noted the Centre's role in enhancing interdisciplinary collaboration and supporting small businesses. The learning and networking opportunities were also appreciated.

KEQ3 – How important is it to you, your organisation and/or community for the CLLMM Research Centre to continue developing and maintain its presence in the future?

Likert Scale Summary:

- Extremely important: 89.5%
- Very important: 10.5%
- Moderately/Slightly/Not at all important: 0%

There is strong consensus that the Centre must continue beyond its current funding cycle. Respondents cited climate change, ecological degradation, and the need for long-term data as reasons for sustained investment. Suggestions included expanding research upstream, developing PhD training programs, and strengthening strategic partnerships. The Centre is viewed as essential for building resilience and preparedness for future challenges.

KEQ4 – How successful has the CLLMM Research Centre been for bringing together First Nations groups, community, researchers and government to jointly build knowledge?

Likert Scale Summary:

- Extremely successful: 55.6%
- Very successful: 38.9%
- Moderately successful: 0%
- Slightly successful: 5.5%
- Not at all successful: 0%

The Centre is widely recognised for its success in fostering collaboration among First Nations, community, researchers, and government. Respondents praised initiatives like yarning circles, citizen science, and inclusive forums. A few noted areas for improvement, such as ensuring deeper First Nations input and better coordination across agencies. Overall, the Centre has laid a strong foundation for collaborative environmental governance.

Discussion and analysis

The mid-term review results not only reflect strong approval of the CLLMM Research Centre Science Program, but also reveal deeper strategic implications for the region and its stakeholders. The overwhelmingly positive sentiment—evidenced by high agreement on value, relevance, and importance—signals that the Centre has become a trusted and legitimate platform for collaborative environmental governance.

This legitimacy is particularly significant in the context of First Nations engagement, where the Centre’s co-design approach has fostered genuine partnerships and built social capital that extends beyond the immediate research outputs. The Centre’s success in integrating First Nations knowledge, community perspectives, and scientific expertise has not only enhanced the quality and relevance of research, but also established a foundation of trust and mutual respect. This is a rare achievement in environmental management and positions the Centre as a leader in inclusive, place-based research.

Stakeholder feedback also highlights the Centre’s role as a model for collaborative governance. The delivery model—embedding end-users in all stages of the research life cycle—has been repeatedly praised for its effectiveness in breaking down silos and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. This approach has enabled the Centre to respond to local priorities while maintaining scientific rigour, and it offers a replicable framework for other regions seeking to balance cultural, ecological, and policy objectives.

The survey responses underscore the urgency of addressing climate change and ecological vulnerability in the CLLMM region. Stakeholders view the Centre as critical infrastructure for long-term adaptation and resilience planning, with its research outputs directly informing policy, management, and community action. The emphasis on sustained presence and continued investment reflects a recognition that the challenges facing the region are ongoing and require adaptive, collaborative solutions.

Importantly, the social capital and relationships built through the Centre are strategic assets that underpin future research, policy uptake, and funding opportunities. The trust established with First Nations and community groups enhances the Centre’s ability to respond to emerging issues and to leverage additional resources. The positive feedback on the Centre’s impact suggests that its approach could be replicated in other regions or programs seeking to balance scientific, cultural, and community priorities.

While the feedback is overwhelmingly positive, some respondents identified opportunities for clearer strategic direction and stronger coordination. These insights provide valuable guidance for the Centre as it moves into the final stages of the program, highlighting the importance of ongoing evaluation, learning, and adaptation. By embedding mechanisms for real-time feedback and participatory evaluation, the Centre can continue to refine its approach and maximise its impact.

In summary, the mid-term review affirms the CLLMM Research Centre’s success in building a trusted, inclusive, and impactful platform for environmental research and governance. The program’s achievements in fostering collaboration, integrating diverse knowledge systems, and addressing urgent ecological challenges position it as a model for future initiatives in the region and beyond.

Recommendations

This mid-term review was aimed at understanding how the Centre has been tracking, to gather stakeholder perspectives that could be provided to Goyder for consideration during the last phases of the \$8m investment program, and to provide insight into any adjustments desirable within the current funding envelope.

On the merits of the surveys and initial discussions with the Goyder Institute, there are no proposed adjustments to the final stages of the program. Feedback on the program was overwhelmingly positive, and the expectation from Goyder is that the planned milestones and deliverables can be delivered in full. Where adjustments at the final stages of the program are required to maximise the outcomes available from the investment in the Centre, both DCCEEW and the Goyder Institute remain open to those discussions.

With that as background and context, to build on its success and to help the Centre maintain its role as a trusted, inclusive, and impactful platform for environmental research and governance, the CLLMM Research Centre could consider the following:

Enhance communication and visibility of research outputs

A continued focus on dissemination of research outputs and increasing meaningful engagement with key decision-makers remains critical. The Research Centre has demonstrated exemplary practice in communicating outcomes to partners and the local community, but could consider engaging more strategically with end-users. These include DCCEEW, MDBA, DEW and PIRSA.

Continue the focus on First Nations relationships and leadership

First Nations perspectives and leadership in all aspects of the Program should be continued into the final stages of program delivery, including evaluation. This should include ensuring that cultural values, knowledge and outcomes are incorporated into end-user decision-making tools and resources.

Strengthen relationships with key partners to address emerging issues

Although there is limited ability to adjust research programs during the current funding phase, there is merit in strengthening relationships pertaining to emerging issues, such as the Harmful Algal Bloom or coastal hazard management. This could underpin the value of the Research Centre if future funding opportunities arise.

Promote the strengths and value of the Research Centre business delivery model

This survey clearly demonstrates that the delivery model of research end-user co-design, with end-users being embedded in all stages of the research life cycle, is highly valued by all stakeholders. This model has fostered trust in the community. It is important that this social capital is sustained into the future.

Develop a Strategic Impact Framework

To better communicate the Centre's value, a framework that maps research outputs to policy, community, and ecological outcomes could be developed. This would help end-users and funders see the tangible impact of the Centre's work.

Embed Evaluation and Learning Mechanisms.

As the program enters its final stages, embedding real-time evaluation and learning mechanisms will help capture lessons and inform future iterations. This could include participatory evaluation with First Nations and community groups.

Conclusion

The mid-term review of the CLLMM Research Centre Science Program provides compelling evidence of the Centre's positive influence across the Coorong, Lower Lakes, and Murray Mouth region. Stakeholder feedback, gathered through both quantitative and qualitative methods, demonstrates a high level of satisfaction with the Centre's approach, outcomes, and ongoing relevance. The program's ability to unite First Nations, community members, researchers, and government agencies has been a defining strength, fostering a collaborative environment where diverse perspectives are valued and integrated.

Participants consistently highlighted the Centre's role in building trust, supporting knowledge exchange, and ensuring that research is both locally grounded and scientifically robust. The co-design model, which places end-users and First Nations voices at the heart of the research process, has not only improved the quality of outputs but also strengthened relationships and social capital within the region. This foundation of trust and mutual respect is now seen as essential for addressing the complex environmental and cultural challenges facing the CLLMM system.

The review also underscores the importance of the Centre's work in the context of climate change and ecological uncertainty. Stakeholders recognise that the region's future resilience depends on sustained, adaptive research and ongoing community engagement. The Centre's presence is viewed as critical infrastructure for monitoring, learning, and responding to emerging issues, ensuring that management strategies remain relevant and effective.

While the overall sentiment is strongly positive, the review has also surfaced constructive suggestions for further improvement. These include enhancing the visibility and communication of research outcomes, deepening First Nations leadership, and strengthening partnerships to address new and evolving challenges. The recommendations provided in this report offer practical steps to build on the Centre's achievements and ensure its success.