

Project Package

Cultural Billabong Restoration



Project developed by Feli McHughes, Ngemba Nation
Supported by NSW Irrigators' Council.





Healing Country, Healing Mob



What is Cultural Billabong Restoration?

Cultural Billabong Restoration is an Indigenous-designed methodology to Close the Gap, based on culturally appropriate employment to care for Country to restore billabongs and riparian ecosystems.

By restoring this connection to country, giving opportunity to exercise cultural creativity through culturally-appropriate, meaningful employment; the project aims to empower indigenous people trapped in a cycle of socioeconomic disadvantage and deprivation, boost regional communities across a full range of social indicators (health, education, crime, domestic violence, drug/alcohol abuse, etc), whilst also improving ecosystem health by harnessing cultural knowledge of land and water management.

The project specifically targets the most socio-economically disadvantaged 'fringe-dwellers' – i.e. those who may be less able, ready, or interested to access or participate in mainstream employment. According to Feli, "Indigenous communities excel when they are working with their land as custodians".

The vision for this project is to become an industry of its own across the state, or Basin, in which a workforce is developed based on this methodology. In this way, the project strives to provide a paradigm shift to Closing the Gap.

Key to success is partnerships, particularly between private 'landholders' and Traditional Owners, to demonstrate mutual respect and collaboration.

Why the Billabong?

Feli describes that:

"Billabongs ,through First Nations' eyes, are the kidneys of the river. They produce the 'antibiotics' for the rivers 'immune systems'".

This healing power of the billabong is seen to extend to its custodians: *healing country, healing mob.*

What are the objectives?

Cultural	Socio-Economic	Environmental
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Close the Gap• Connection to Country• Passing down knowledge• Access to sites on private land	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Culturally-appropriate employment• Training & skills development• Flow-on effects to community - improved health, education, crime indicators etc	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Billabong restoration (habitat improvement, feral species management)• Embed Indigenous science and knowledge in water management• Water quality improvements

Who is Feli?



This Project is proudly an Indigenous-designed methodology, by Feli McHughes (Ngemba Nation). Feli grew up on the banks of the Barwon River. Feli has extensive experience in water resource management for First-Nations.

Feli was part of the Interim Committee to establish the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) in 2009, to which he is currently serving as Chair, and has had long-standing roles on the Board of Directors and as Nation-Delegate.

Feli is also appointed on the Murray–Darling Basin Authority's (MDBA) statutory Basin Community Committee (BCC).

Feli was appointed as the inaugural First-Nations advisor to the NSW Irrigators' Council in 2018, leading this project.

"The Ngemba people feel empowered to work and connect with their rivers, floodplains and billabongs for all of Australia. This brings many current benefits to their society: hope, motivation, value, employment, health, education, understanding, equity and reconciliation."

Who is the NSW Irrigators' Council?

NSWIC is the peak body representing irrigators and irrigation communities in NSW. NSWIC has member organisations in every Murray-Darling Basin valley of NSW, and several coastal valleys, representing over 12,000 water access licence holders. Our vision is for the secure, sustainable and productive management of water resources in NSW.

What is the history of the Project?

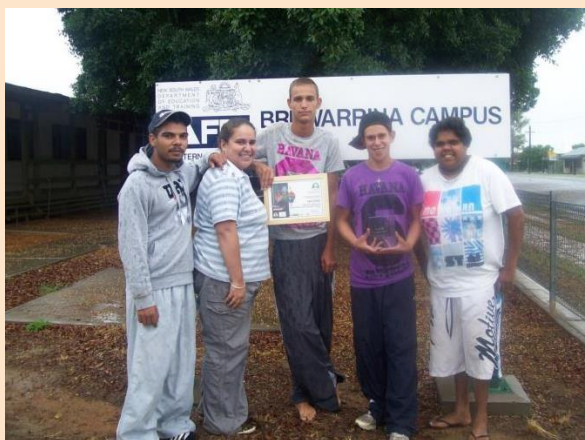
The Project has grown from a 2006 pilot project - the award-winning Restoration of the Old Brewarrina Mission Wetland by the Ngemba Billabong Restoration and Landcare Group, led by Ngemba elder and then Landcare Group CEO Feli McHughes.

This Project seeks to build on the 2006 pilot project, but in partnerships with the irrigation sector.

Feli McHughes approached NSWIC with the Project concept in 2018, and was invited to present at a General Meeting of NSWIC member representatives from across the State. The Project was warmly embraced, and Feli was asked to become the first formally appointed First Nations advisor to NSWIC.

Feli and NSWIC staff have invested a significant period of time in developing relationships with key project partners, such as key stakeholders, government agencies, politicians/advisors, and community members.

Feli is highly respected by the industry, and several irrigation farmers with billabongs or significant riparian sites on their private property have expressed interest in the Project.



Images: [Left] Ngemba youth with NSW Landcare Award outside of the Brewarrina TAFE campus.

[Right] Ngemba Elders and youth at the Billabong, testing water quality as part of their TAFE skill development course.

Where is the Project up to?

The first Project site has been identified – a billabong on the Darling River near Bourke, located at an irrigation farm owned by Australian Food & Fibre (AFF).

Images: Map of Project Site (Right), Photo of Billabong 2022 (Below)



This site was selected because AFF expressed significant interest, the site is relatively close to Bourke for ease of access, and AFF can deliver water to the site from existing river pumps/channels if required. It has also been observed that during/following flood periods when water naturally fills the billabong, an abundance of bird life flocks to the site.



Key project partners met in Bourke in June 2022 for the first project planning meeting and site-visit, and Feli and NSWIC subsequently met with Bourke Shire Council and Western LLS in August 2022.





Local irrigators support cultural billabong restoration project

Indigenous leaders, landholders, and agencies, met in Bourke last week to discuss the potential for a Caring for Country project based on water management.

The billabong project is the brainchild of Ngenbama man, Feli McHughes, who grew up on the banks of the Barwon River in Brewarrina.

Mr McHughes said that the project is designed to provide culturally appropriate employment for the most disadvantaged in communities like Bourke and Brewarrina.

"Basically, we have negotiated with local landholders to use riparian sites located on privately-owned irrigated farmland, to care for country, restore billabong habitat and water quality", Mr McHughes said.

Working in partnership with irrigation farmers, the project is designed to provide training and skills for unemployed people and embed indigenous knowledge



Promoter of billabong restoration, Feli McHughes (centre) with NSW Irrigators Policy Manager Christine Freak and Bernie George from Australian Food & Fibre at one of the billabongs on Darling Farms. NHD01 NHD

in habitat restorations and water management.

Australian Food & Fibre CEO, Joe Robinson, said that his organisation had committed to support the project with access to billabongs and riparian zones to assist the local Aboriginal community in this "Closing the Gap" project.

"We are happy to commit

resources to the project, including access to the sensitive areas that need protection," Mr Robinson said.

Chairman of the Bourke Tribal Council, Philip Sullivan, challenged people in his welcome to country - asking everyone to stand for making a difference.

"Why are we here?" Mr Sullivan, who is also the local

Regional Engagement Officer for the Murray Darling Basin Authority, asked. "Are we here to make a difference, or are we here to make a living, or are we here to look after each other?"

Project founder, Feli McHughes developed the award-winning methodology of billabong restoration at the Old Brewarrina Mis-



CEO of AFE, Joe Robinson, explaining his company's support for the Cultural Billabong Restoration project at Bourke. NHD01 NHD

sion Wetland, which was endorsed by the CSIRO.

Mr McHughes was also a founder of the Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN) where he remains a director. He was also recently appointed to the Basin Community Committee of the Murray Darling Basin Authority.

The meeting included

representatives from Maranguka, Local Land Services, Barwon-Darling Water, REDIE, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, Public Works Advisory, the Department of Planning

and Environment, Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations, NSW Irrigator's Council, and the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder.

What are the next steps?

To get Project 1 (AFF, Bourke) off the ground.

To do this, the Project is seeking to identify the relevant bodies to run the project, such as to project manage, co-ordinate relevant agencies, source and manage funding, etc.

Longer-term, the next steps would be to scale-up the project to more sites across the Basin.

Key People

<i>Feli McHughes</i>	First-Nations Advisor, NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC)
	Chair, Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN)
	Representative, Basin Communities Committee (BCC)
<i>Christine Freak</i>	Policy Manager, NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC)
<i>Claire Miller</i>	Chief Executive Officer, NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC)
<i>Jim Cush</i>	Chair, NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC)
<i>Bernie George</i>	Water Services and Compliance Manager, Australian Food & Fibre
<i>John Carter</i>	Manager Darling Farms for Australian Food & Fibre
<i>Joe Robinson</i>	Managing Director, Australian Food & Fibre (AFF)
	Chair, Barwon-Darling Water Users Association
<i>Ian Cole</i>	Executive Officer, Barwon-Darling Water Users Association
<i>Alex Macintosh</i>	Regional Manager (northern NSW), Cotton Australia
<i>Raymond Thompson</i>	Treasurer, Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations (NBAN)
<i>Max Saxby</i>	Regional Manager, National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)
<i>Michelle Payne</i>	National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)
<i>Terina Barrett</i>	National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)
<i>Alistair Ferguson</i>	Executive Director Founder, Maranguka
<i>Andrew Rose</i>	Director of Special Projects, Maranguka
<i>Peter Gibbs</i>	General Manager, Regional Enterprise Development Institute (REDI.E) (Bourke)
<i>Alana Hardy</i>	Regional Enterprise Development Institute (REDI.E) - Brewarrina office
<i>Bradley Moggridge</i>	A/Professor University of Canberra Centre for Applied Water Science.
<i>Phillip Sullivan</i>	Regional Engagement Officer, Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA)
<i>Mark Foreman</i>	Director (Aboriginal Partnerships), Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA)
<i>Monique White</i>	Assistant Director, Engagement / Communications, Engagement and Strategy / Basin Strategy and Knowledge
<i>Bruce Male</i>	Acting Assistant Secretary Wetlands, Policy and Northern Water Use, (CEWH)
<i>Kyle McGrath</i>	Engagement and Partnerships, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH)
<i>Michelle Coll</i>	Engagement and Partnerships, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH)

<i>Lani Barnes</i>	Engagement and Partnerships, Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder (CEWH)
<i>Matthew Miles</i>	Senior Wetlands and Rivers Conservation Officer, Department of Planning and Environment (DPE), NSW Government
<i>Daniel Van Horik</i>	Project officer, Western Local Land Services (LLS), NSW Government
<i>Erlina Compton</i>	General Manager, Western Local Land Services (LLS), NSW Government
<i>Mandy Rice</i>	EA Western Local Land Services (LLS), NSW Government
<i>Gemma Turnbull</i>	Team Leader Agriculture, Western Local Land Services (LLS), NSW Government
<i>Guy Gibbs</i>	Land Services Officer, Aboriginal Communities, Western LLS, NSW Government
<i>Richard Naden</i>	Project Manager, Aboriginal Advisory Group Member, Public Works Advisory, NSW Government
<i>Gavin Priestley</i>	Regional Manager, Public Works Advisory, NSW Government
<i>Danny Lester</i>	Director – Aboriginal Outcomes, regional delivery
<i>Leonie Brown</i>	General Manager, Bourke Shire Council
<i>Cr Barry Hollman</i>	Mayor, Bourke Shire Council

FAQ

How is this different to ranger programs?

This project is entirely different to ranger programs – in that it targets the most socio-economically disadvantaged (who may not yet be at a stage to obtain/participate in that form of work), and seeks to work with the mob, rather than specific individuals. It also fosters a different relationship to Country – for people to be custodians and part of Country – rather than a 'ranger' which we have heard can be seen as more authoritarian. Individuals who thrive in this style of work, having undergone the skills/training, may then become suitable to choose to pursue ranger programs if desired.

Why is the irrigation industry involved?

The NSW irrigation sector is a proud supporter and driver of this Project. Many billabong sites are located on farmland, so partnerships are key. Landholders want to see these sites well managed.

Many communities in NSW with irrigated agriculture as a primary economic base also have a high-proportion of the population identifying as indigenous, meaning they are one community. Within these communities, it is therefore a shared vision to see improved socio-economic outcomes for the community.



What are cultural water outcomes?

The National Cultural Flows Research Project identifies many cultural water outcomes, including:

- 'retain Indigenous population with quality of life and wellbeing improvements'
- 'fulfilment of spiritual/cultural obligations through landscape management',
- 'improved pest and weed management',
- 'Aboriginal cultural, social and environmental perspectives in water management',
- 're-establishment of cultural practices including ceremonies and passing of knowledge to many generations',
- 'increase in nesting locations and habitat'

For more information, see: <https://culturalflows.com.au/>

What is the context for Indigenous communities in the Basin?

The Independent Assessment into Social and Economic Conditions in the Basin (2020) sums up the situation well:

"Our hearts sink when we observe the current circumstances of First Nations peoples in the Basin and we call for urgent change to improve their social and economic circumstances. Both policy reform and additional resourcing are needed to support First Nations' access to water for Cultural, environmental and economic outcomes."

Project Linkages

Name of plan	Owner of plan	Relevant actions within plan being addressed (include reference where possible)	Brief description of how target will be addressed
Basin Plan	Commonwealth Government	<i>Part 14—Indigenous values and uses</i> <i>10.52 Objectives and outcomes based on Indigenous values and uses</i>	This project contributes to the realisation of indigenous values in on-ground water management activities, based on the desires of those peoples (through an indigenous-developed methodology).
National Agreement on Closing the Gap	Parties to the National Agreement	<i>Target 15 - “People maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical and economic relationship with their land and waters”. Outcome 7 – “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are engaged in employment or education” Outcome 8 – “Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.” Outcome 14 – “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.”</i>	Providing culturally appropriate employment, and training to improve longer-term employability. Caring for country and healthy country is linked to spiritual wellbeing, with flow on impacts through indigenous communities.
Commonwealth Environmental Water Office Water Management Plan Chapter 3.7 – Barwon-Darling River	Commonwealth Environmental Water Office	<i>“The rivers and waterholes of the Barwon–Darling system hold significant spiritual and cultural importance for Aboriginal people from several nations including the Barkandji, Murrawarri, Ngemba and Ngayampaa peoples.” (P 107)</i> <i>“Representatives of the First Nations peoples of the Barwon-Darling River system have identified environmental objectives for their country for 2020–21 (Table 1) ... Some of these objectives sit outside the scope of water for the environment to influence, while for others, the link between water for the environment and the site or species is not well understood.”</i>	This Project will seek to contribute to the First Nations environmental objectives listed in this Plan, but which sit outside the scope of the CEWO (i.e., because they are on private land, or may require pumping infrastructure to put water into the site in the absence of high flow /floods/ heavy rainfall).
Barwon-Darling Long-Term Water Plan – Part A Barwon-Darling Long-Term Water Plan – Part B	NSW Government	<i>“The ecological condition of the Barwon–Darling water-dependent environmental assets is largely driven by flows that connect the instream benches, cut-off channels, anabranches, floodplains and wetlands. Flows that provide these functions support organic carbon transfer and nutrient cycling, replenish refuge pools to maintain water quality, trigger movement and breeding of native fish and waterbirds, and directly impact vegetation condition, dispersal of propagules and habitat availability.” (P 2 – Part A)</i>	Billabongs are an important part of the ecology of the Barwon-Darling. These sites commonly are located on private property and thus collaboration with landholders is needed to manage these sites so that they complement environmental and cultural watering objectives for public land and the catchment as a whole.

Letters of Support

AFF
Australian Food & Fibre
ABN 95 372 342 995

74 Heber Street, Moree
PO Box 399, Moree NSW 2400
02 6752 5795
officeadmin@aff-limited.com.au

15 December 2021

To Whom it may concern,

Re: Letter of support for First-Nations Billabong Restoration Project

This letter is to formally express our support and interest in a site on our property being made available for the NSW Irrigators' Council (NSWIC) *Cultural Billabong Restoration Project*, developed by the NSWIC First Nations advisor Feli McHughes (Ngemba Nation).

We understand that the Billabong site, located on our Australian Food & Fibre (AFF) property near Bourke, NSW, would be suitable.

Our expression of support and interest recognises that, pending successful grant funding, AFF and NSWIC would seek further agreements on the nature of activities, access arrangements and safety requirements for the Billabong site.

AFF views this as a ground-breaking project. We believe that this type of project is very positive for our communities, with significant potential to close the gap, to support cultural, social and economic outcomes, and to improve the health of riverine ecosystems.

We trust that trialling this project on our property would demonstrate the success and further potential of the methodology and provide a useful model to hopefully be replicated elsewhere in the Basin.

AFF are proud to support this project which recognises indigenous water values and interests through working collaboratively with our industry. We see partnership projects of this kind as a way forward for sound cultural water management in the Basin.

Yours faithfully,



Joe Robinson
Managing Director

Yours faithfully,



Bernard AF George
Water Services and Compliance



Barngan: Bajars, Bikanini, Budji, Ewaleyi, Gihabal, Gomeri, Gungari, Guwamu (Koon), Jitjiti, Kamboral, Kunja, Kwalindi,
Majungpa, Mandandji, Marriyati, Munawarr, Ngemba, Ngilympoo, Walean, Waka Waka

"Keeping our water spirits and our connections alive"

Monday, 12 April 2021

NSW Irrigators' Council
PO Box Q640, Queen Victoria Building
Sydney, NSW 1230

Letter of support for First-Nations Billabong Restoration Project

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to express Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations support for the Cultural Billabong Restoration Project developed by Feli McHughes (Ngemba Nation), and being pursued in partnership with the NSW Irrigators' Council.

Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations is a peak representative body with a Union of Sovereign First Nations of the 21 Nations in the Northern Murray Darling Basin.

The Project methodology has significant potential to close the gap for First Nations' communities in the Murray-Darling Basin. Through this methodology, First Nations' Peoples can access culturally appropriate employment, which harnesses our instinctual cultural creativity to care for country through the restoration of billabongs and riparian ecosystems. This meaningful employment will flow-on and improve social and economic conditions for First Nations' Peoples, leading to improvements in health and wellbeing, better education outcomes and lower representation in the criminal justice system.

The Project is a much-needed paradigm-shift that brings together various stakeholders from First-Nations and irrigators to work together towards common goals for our communities. This is a unique and special Project that has the support of many people from within our community and more broadly.

NBAN Ltd
www.nban.org.au

0404 533 315
266 Margaret St, Toowoomba, Qld, 4350

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NBAN are proud to support this Project which recognises indigenous water values and interests, within an award-winning methodology that is a much needed key to closing the gap for First Nations' and their communities.

Kind regards,

Tanya Kirkegaard
Acting Executive Officer
Northern Basin Aboriginal Nations



09 April 2021

Claire Miller
CEO NSW Irrigators' Council

Letter of support for First Nations Billabong Restoration Project

On behalf of Western Local Land Services, I am pleased to confirm our organisation supports the Cultural Billabong Restoration Project developed by Feli McHughes (Ngemba Nation) in partnership with the NSW Irrigators' Council.

Local Land Services are a regionally based NSW Government agency that delivers quality, customer-focused services to farmers, landholders and the community. Our staff are technical experts who can assist with agricultural production, biosecurity, natural resource management, protecting Aboriginal Cultural Heritage and emergency management. The Cultural Billabong Restoration Project aligns closely to our local and state-wide goals and strategies, in particular: *CC3 Create opportunities for Aboriginal people to connect to Country and share traditional land management knowledge*. The Western LLS Local Strategic Plan 2016 – 2021 can be found [here](#).

In addition, this project also aligns closely and compliments two programs Western Local Land Services are currently delivering:

- Pathways to Country program and small grants - information can be found [here](#)
- NSW Fencing Northern Basin River Banks program – information can be found [here](#)

We have great confidence that the Cultural Billabong Restoration Project developed by Feli McHughes (Ngemba Nation) in partnership with the NSW Irrigators' Council, will deliver outstanding outcomes on behalf of project partners and supporters. We look forward to future partnerships with NSW Irrigators Council, providing in-kind assistance for this project and funding opportunities pending availability, to compliment the outcomes that the project will deliver.

Please feel free to contact me on 0409 334 970 or ben.slingsby@lls.nsw.gov.au if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

Ben Slingsby
Manager Operations (Acting)

NSW Irrigators' Council
PO Box Q640, Queen Victoria Building
Sydney, NSW 1230

9th April 2021

Letter of support for Ngemba Peoples Billabong Restoration Project

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to express support for the Cultural Billabong Restoration Project developed by Feli McHughes (Ngemba Nation) and being pursued in partnership with the NSW Irrigators' Council.

The Project methodology has significant potential to *Close the Gap* for Indigenous communities in the Murray-Darling Basin. Through this methodology, our people can access culturally appropriate employment, that harnesses our instinctual cultural creativity to care for country to restore billabongs and riparian ecosystems. This meaningful employment will flow-on to improved social and economic conditions for our people, which in-turn will lead to improvements in health and wellbeing, better education outcomes and lower representation in the criminal justice system.

The Project is a much-needed paradigm-shift that brings together various stakeholders from many Aboriginal Nations and irrigators to work together towards common goals for our communities. This is a unique and special Project that has the support of many people from within our community and more broadly.

I am proud to support this Project which recognises Indigenous water values and interests, within an award-winning methodology that is a much-needed key to *Closing the Gap* for our people.

Kind regards,



Associate Professor Bradley Moggridge
Kamilaroi Water Scientist
University of Canberra
Centre for Applied Water Science | Faculty of Science and Technology
M 0 417 252 667

NSW Irrigators' Council
PO Box Q640, Queen Victoria Building
Sydney, NSW 1230

April 2021

Letter of support for First-Nations Billabong Restoration Project

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to express our support for the Cultural Billabong Restoration Project developed by Feli McHughes (Ngemba Nation), and being pursued in partnership with the NSW Irrigators' Council.

The Project methodology has significant potential to close the gap for indigenous communities in the Murray-Darling Basin. Through this methodology, our people can access culturally appropriate employment, that harnesses our instinctual cultural creativity to care for country to restore billabongs and riparian ecosystems. This meaningful employment will flow-on to improved social and economic conditions for our people, which in-turn will lead to improvements in health and wellbeing, better education outcomes and lower representation in the criminal justice system.

The Project is a much-needed paradigm-shift that brings together various stakeholders from First-Nations and irrigators to work together towards common goals for our communities. This is a unique and special Project that has the support of many people from within our community and more broadly.

We are proud to support this Project which recognises indigenous water values and interests, within an award-winning methodology that is a much needed key to closing the gap for our people.

Kind regards,

Corey Tutt