

Werribee Irrigation District

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Location

The Werribee Irrigation District (WID) is one of Melbourne's vegetable "gardens", located on Melbourne's doorstep in the estuarine flood plain of the Werribee River.

The region was settled immediately after the first arrivals in Melbourne of European settlers, and has been an important agricultural centre since the early nineteenth century.

History

Settlement of the Werribee Basin quickly followed the arrival of John Batman in 1835. By 1837 squatters had reached the Bacchus Marsh area and by 1840 most of the plains and foothills within the river basin were occupied.

The Werribee Irrigation Trust was formed in November 1888 following demands for alternative water supplies to avoid the consequences of severe droughts. It was to provide irrigation facilities for 595 hectares of land north of the Melbourne–Geelong railway line, adjacent to the township of Werribee. The Trust operated for only a few years before it failed financially. It was eventually abolished under the provisions of the Water Act of 1905.

In March 1906, the State Government's Land Purchase and Management Board purchased 9,400 ha of the "Werribee Estate" to develop as an irrigation area and subdivide for closer settlement. Of this, 3,400 ha were later assessed as suitable for irrigation.

The Pykes Creek Reservoir, which was the initial storage for both the Werribee Irrigation District and the irrigation system upstream at Bacchus Marsh, was completed in 1911. The diversion weir on the Werribee River and the main channel of the irrigation district were completed in 1912 and a system of channels was constructed to supply water for domestic and stock purposes to non-irrigated areas within the old estate and for irrigation of around 265 hectares of land.

By 1914 the area of land that could be irrigated had been increased to 2,185 hectares. In 1916, Melton Reservoir was completed. Following this and the completion of other works, the Werribee Irrigation and Water Supply District was formed in October 1917 under the control of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission.

Construction of a surface drainage system began in 1920 for areas with poor sub-soils. The drainage system has since been extended and now serves nearly all the irrigation district and some land outside of it.

The final stage in the Werribee Basin storage system was put in place with the construction of Merrimu Reservoir in 1968–1986 and its subsequent enlargement.

Operations

The WID now receives its irrigation supply from the combination of three storages at Pykes Creek, Merrimu Reservoir and Melton Reservoir. These storages now hold water from both the Werribee and Lerderderg River systems.

Following several years of extreme drought conditions, the WID Recycled Water Scheme was implemented in 2004 to supplement water supply.

Although a great deal of pipe-lining has been carried out as a result of urban development and the replacement of channels, much of the district remains open channel, including significant lengths of the Main Channel from the Werribee River.

Like Bacchus Marsh and the Macalister Irrigation District in Gippsland, Werribee is a gravity irrigation district and relies on upstream heads of water to move supply through the channels and pipes to the farmer.

Water is ordered by customers through Southern Rural Water's Waterline telephone ordering system and delivered by our Water Services Officers through a complex series of checks, regulators and valves. This brings the water to the "farm gate", where it is measured by a Dethridge wheel on open channels or a standard flow meter on pipelines. From here it is directed by the farmer, usually into storage dams and then into on-farm irrigation systems.

Prices for water in the Werribee Irrigation Districts are determined by the Essential Services Commission following recommendation by the Southern Rural Water Board. This recommendation is made following consultation with the Werribee Bacchus Marsh Customer Consultative Committee, which is made up of growers from within the district.