



DRONES, WEEDS & AI

Snowy Monaro Regional Council's biosecurity team recently gave a presentation to representatives of the NSW State Government and Local Land Services to share the details of their industry leading drone and machine-learning driven weed detection program.

Council's Biosecurity Officer Neil Murdoch, the program leader with a background in environmental science and technology, took attendees through the details of this innovative initiative with external technology partner Liam O'Duibhir from 2pi Software based out of Bega.

"Our Council is leading the way in combining cutting edge technology with local knowledge to manage weeds and invasive species in our region," said Coordinator Biosecurity Brett Jones, Snowy Monaro Regional Council.

"We send our camera-equipped drone up over areas known or suspected to have populations of weeds. The drone flies passes over the area in a pre-determined grid, taking thousands of photos in a session."

"The photos are stored in a huge cloud-based storage facility, then run through our custom-built software that identifies weeds from these high-altitude photos using tiny differences in colouration between the weeds and the surrounding plants and grassland."

"Similar technologies are currently being used by the National Parks & Wildlife Service in their Orange

Hawkweed control efforts, but we aim to provide a system that farmers and land managers alike can utilise for their own purposes, using small and affordable drones."

Snowy Monaro Regional Council and 2pi Software have developed this technology to the point that it can now successfully pick out invasive weeds with orange flowers in a field dominated by native orange flowers, even from a height of 30 metres.

The Orange Hawkweed eradication program inspired the development of the technology and as it continues to develop, Council anticipates being able to remotely identify specific grassy weeds such as African Lovegrass out of a grass pasture.

"Using the technology to pick a green grass out of a green grass based pasture is a tough ask but it's certainly not out of our reach now," Mr Jones said.

Snowy Monaro Regional Council is leading the industry in the utilisation of the latest technology to serve local biosecurity needs and is unprecedented in local government in Australia.

For the full technical whitepaper and details about the drone program and the technology that underpins it, please visit 2pisoftware.com/white-paper-african-lovegrass-cloud-based-shared-services-weeds-portal/

For more on biosecurity in the Snowy Monaro, visit www.snowymonaro.nsw.gov.au/Environment-and-Waste/Biosecurity-and-Weeds

STAY ENGAGED

All current and future public consultations are housed on Council's 'Your Say' page: www.yoursaysnowymonaro.com.au



WORK WITH US

Work for your community in an exciting role with Snowy Monaro Regional Council. New opportunities are regularly available. Scan the QR code or visit our website.



SCAN FOR JOBS



COUNCIL FOCUSED ON IMPROVING FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

At the April Council meeting in Cooma, Councillors agreed to engage a qualified consultant to develop a scope in preparation for an independent financial investigation. This first step will involve Councillors' review of costs and timing from the research provided through this scoping process.

"The information we have been receiving indicates that there are significant challenges to Council's finances that can impact the community," said Mayor Narelle Davis.

"From 2018 to 2022 the Council has been operating on approved deficit budgets. In 2019, this stood at a \$6.2m deficit. The previous Council approved the 2021 \$4.2million deficit budget which this Council is now working with.

"This elected Council, for the past three months, has been working with Council staff each week to improve the financial bottom line of Council, already reducing the \$4.2 million deficit budget to a projected \$3.89million for the March Quarterly Business report. Noting this deficit is related to the required depreciation accounting for all council assets which is greater than \$1billion – this includes infrastructure, property, plant and equipment.

Council's Executive Team is now reporting its projected financial position to the Council on a monthly basis, in addition to the monthly funds management reports.

Mayor Davis noted, "Council will develop a delivery and financial plan based on the best information currently available, however this may change in light of additional information that comes out of this consultation process and other sources such as internal audit.

"This Council is aware and I have been clear with the community that difficult decisions will be required. Any changes to the financial plan will require community consultation. The Councillors and staff will be undertaking extensive community consultation on the delivery and financial plan in May 2022," she said.

Snowy Monaro Regional Council's draft budget for 2022/2023 will demonstrate that inroads are being made toward reducing operating costs/deficit and moving toward surplus.

Without an operational surplus, Council does not have the revenue (generated from rates) to undertake significant maintenance of assets across the region.

This region has 67% more 'roads per person' to maintain than the average regional town and large regional councils in NSW. There are a number of other comparisons to help bring perspective to the situation and the challenges to the finances and other resources.

The number of smaller communities across the Snowy Monaro means that Council provides one swimming pool for every 4,100 people, compared to the average of every 12,400; one hall for every 900 people compared to 3,200 average; one library per every 6,900 people as opposed to every 14,000.

There are less people to spread the cost of owning and operating the infrastructure and services, which means either higher user costs or higher costs each landowner has to contribute through rates.

This Council faces a difficult financial situation in supporting a large geographical area that requires high levels of infrastructure and maintenance, such as roads, water, wastewater, buildings and footpaths. This means that Council is heavily reliant on grant funding as there is such a small ratepayer base for a very large geographical region.

The Federal Government Financial Assistance Grants program is designed to compensate communities for the relative disadvantages they face due to remoteness, lower income levels, other disadvantage factors.

However, current funding levels provided mean that less than half of that cost impact is covered, with the remaining disadvantage costs falling back to local councils to raise through rates alone from a small population.

Mayor Davis, "There needs to be a change to the level of the Financial Assistance Grant provided by the Federal Government, which has been allowed to decline over the years, otherwise these high costs of living in smaller rural regions must be covered by our community through revenue raised by rates."

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MONARO RAIL TRAIL AGREEMENT

Representatives from Monaro Rail Trail Inc (MRT) and Snowy Monaro Regional Council (SMRC) met on Friday 28 January 2022 to sign the historic first formal agreement for the Monaro Rail Trail, a memorandum of understanding between SMRC, MRT and Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council (QPRC).

With the agreement signed, the two councils and MRT can now proceed to develop detailed plans for the rail trail, which is planned to run along the disused rail corridor from Queanbeyan to Bombala. Over 208km, the Monaro Rail Trail will run through Queanbeyan, Michelago, Bredbo, Cooma, Nimmitabel and Bombala.

A feasibility study, completed in November 2019, concluded that the Monaro Rail Trail is an extremely worthwhile project with a benefit to cost ratio of 8:1. The report indicated that this project will boost the local retail and hospitality economy from

the top to the bottom of the region, with the total yearly economic gain estimated to be approximately \$25M.

Trail Development Plan Consultants have completed detailed design of three sections utilising funding from SMRC and QPRC including:

- 24.5km Bombala to Jincumbilly
- 11.5km south from Nimmitabel Railway Station to MacLaughlan Meatworks
- 49km from Queanbeyan to Michelago.



eNEWSLETTER

We do our best to include the most important and relevant stories from the last three months in this rates newsletter, but we can't fit it all.

If you want to stay informed with all the latest news from Council, our fortnightly eNewsletter is the best way to keep up to date.

Launched late last year and growing quickly, this new initiative gives you inside access to everything from meetings to events to major projects.

Head to www.snowymonaro.nsw.gov.au/News-and-Media/eNewsletter to sign up today!

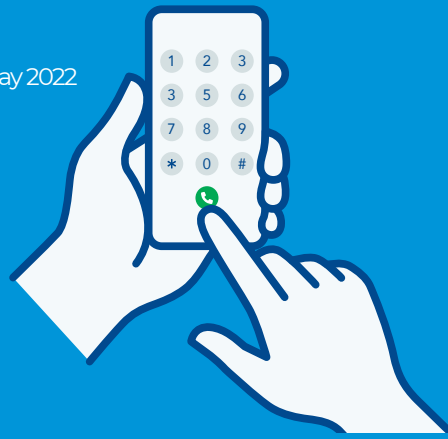
SNOWY MONARO DISASTER DASHBOARD

Our Disaster Dashboard collates information on COVID-19 cases, fire incidents, flood incidents, road conditions, weather radar, power outages, emergency news, and has links to ABC Radio and Council.

This is a crucial resource in times of emergency and uncertainty and is funded by the State Government.

Visit <https://snowymonaro.disasterdashboards.com> and bookmark the page today.





PAY RATES BY PHONE

A reminder to all ratepayers that Council has launched its fully-automated pay-by-phone rate payment system – call 1300 345 345 (available 24/7) and follow the prompts.

It is important to note that traditional over-the-counter payments are not going anywhere. Options available for payment are now:

- **pay in person** – cash, cheque or EFTPOS (VISA, Mastercard, or bank debit card)
- **pay over the phone** (automated) – (VISA or Mastercard)
- **BPAY** (direct through your bank using reference details from your rates or water notice)
- **direct debit** (application form on Council's website)
- **by mail** (cheque or money order)

Anyone wanting to set up an instalment plan for their payments should email rates@snowymonaro.nsw.gov.au or call Council and ask to talk to the rates team.

Council welcomes feedback from the community on this system and is always open to community ideas for further improvements to the rate payment process. Online payment facilities are being reviewed next.

For those ratepayers wishing to access the new payment option system please:

- Phone Council on their 24/7 line: **CALL 1300 345 345**
- Select 2 to pay your water or rates instalment by phone (press 0 to speak to a Customer Service Officer)
- You will then hear an automated message so please follow the prompts:
Press 1 for rates and 2 for water.
- You will need to have handy for reference your rates notice and credit card
- Please note, this automated council payment line accepts VISA and Mastercard only

JINDABYNE HALL CLOCK

For the first time in many, many years, the Jindabyne Hall Clock is ticking again thanks to the NSW Government's Stronger Country Communities funding upgrades to the Jindabyne Memorial Hall and the tireless work of a master horologist.

Council was granted \$130,000 in 2020 under Round 3 of the NSW Government's Stronger Country Communities Fund to breathe new life into Jindabyne Memorial Hall. This much-needed funding saw

the installation of air conditioning, modern lighting and emergency fixtures in the main building. Asbestos was removed and replaced in the toilet block, and the carpark was also upgraded.

The big news is the rebirth of the clock tower. Andrew Markerink of Master Clockmakers installed a modern, automated and low-maintenance clock mechanism to bring the Jindabyne Hall Clock back to life.

DEBT RECOVERY

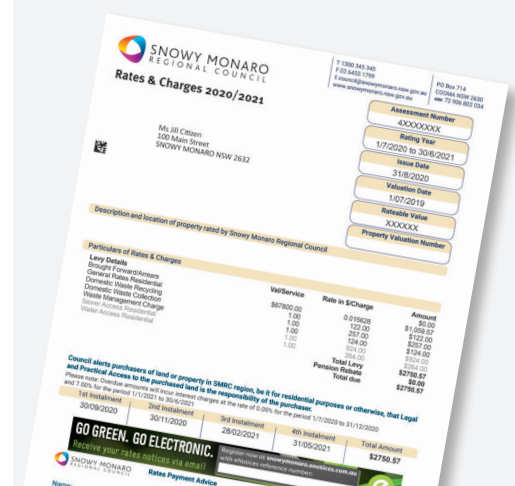
A reminder that Snowy Monaro Regional Council has resumed its regular debt recovery practices after pausing due to regional hardship.

All debt recovery was originally suspended in response to the Black Summer bushfires to grant relief to residents and ratepayers. This suspension was then extended in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented effects on residents and businesses. Interest accrual on debts owed was also paused for some of this time. That interest free period has now ended and normal interest is accruing on outstanding amounts.

Debt recovery has now resumed across the Snowy Monaro and will impact all ratepayers with outstanding balances.

Council reminds residents and ratepayers that this return to normal debt recovery activities does not change the current hardship policy and Council will work with those with outstanding rates to help them get back on track.

If anyone with a debt owing to Council is experiencing financial hardship, for any reason, please contact Council on **1300 345 345** and ask for the rates department or visit any Council office to discuss their options in person.





ON THE ROAD: OUR ROADSIDE WEED-SPRAYING PROGRAM

In a region rich in agriculture and home to some of the world's most valuable ecosystems, Council's weed control programs work to protect our region from the serious risk posed by invasive weeds.

The extensive region-wide works program is one that requires careful planning and with a region that covers more than 15,000km², the perception can be that Council doesn't do enough or 'in my patch of yard'.

The weed control schedules, work, and contracts awarded are all carefully planned and prioritised to deliver the best bang for the buck, and must work in with the seasons such as noting when weeds go to seed. It's a year-round program and there is a lot of ground to cover across the Snowy Monaro which is why it's important for the community, landholders and Council to work together to combat invasive weed issues.

CELEBRATING LOCAL WOMEN

Council came together with community partners to celebrate International Women's Day (IWD) and NSW Women's Week with events in Cooma and Delegate.

International Women's Day is a global celebration of women's social, economic, cultural and political achievements and contributions. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity.

The week kicked off with the Women in Leadership networking

breakfast in Cooma on Tuesday 8 March at the Snowy Hydro Discovery Centre.

International Women's Day in Delegate, our flagship IWD event, was held at the Delegate School of Arts on Tuesday 15 March. Around 60 women came together for a day of entertainment, singing, great food and celebrating community spirit.

The campaign theme for International Women's Day 2022 was #BreakTheBias.

Y SPACE COOMA REFURBISHMENT

Young people have a new space to gather and relax following the reopening of the upgraded Y Space Cooma on Wednesday.

The upgrade has been made possible through a NSW Government Stronger Country Communities Grant of \$169,000. The funding sees the long-time community centre transformed into a modern, safe and inclusive meeting space offering a range of programs to local young people.

The youth space area has expanded, with new flooring and painting throughout and new furniture and computer infrastructure. The outdoor space will also be expanded as part of the upgrade.

PROTECTING WOMBATS

Several agencies came together in March 2020 to conduct a study in the Snowy Monaro to see if virtual fences can help deter the bare-nosed wombat from entering roadways..

Currently, there is diversified research on best practice around discouraging animal and vehicle collisions. One method is virtual fencing which consists of light and sound-based devices which deter animals from coming onto the road.

Although the study suggested a decline in wombat deaths with virtual fencing installation, there were variables that may have impacted this study. More research is needed to see if virtual fencing can be a roadkill mitigation strategy amongst other species and varying habitats.



1. SMRC's Edwina Lowe at Jindabyne Clean-up.
2. SMRC and NSW Hawkweed Eradication partners event with NSW Hawkweed Detection Dogs.
3. Delegate IWD Event.
4. Artist's impression of the new Cooma Weir and Fishway.
5. Council's education team have been out and about during country show season.
6. Staff speaking to members of the NSW State Government during a presentation on Council's weed drone program.
7. Councillors, staff, community members and NSW Member for Monaro Nichole Overall at the refurbished Cooma Multi-Function Centre.
8. Artist's impression of the proposed upgrades to Jindabyne Skate Park.