

# Aquatic ecosystem condition reports

## 2010 panel assessment of creeks and rivers in the South Australian Murray–Darling Basin NRM region

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*EPA 965/11: This information sheet describes the outcome of the panel assessment of creeks and rivers in the South Australian (SA) Murray–Darling Basin Natural Resources Management (NRM) region during 2010.*

### Introduction

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) coordinates a monitoring, evaluation and reporting (MER) program on the aquatic ecosystem condition of South Australian creeks and rivers. This MER program is designed to meet several objectives:

- Providing a statewide monitoring framework for creeks and rivers that revolves through the NRM regions with sufficient frequency to allow for State of the Environment Reporting purposes.
- Describing aquatic ecosystem condition for broad general public understanding.
- Identifying the key pressures and management responses to those pressures.
- Providing a useful reporting format that can support environmental decision making within government, community and industry.

This information sheet provides a summary of the scientific work used in assessing monitoring data from creeks and rivers. Aquatic ecosystem science is not always rigid and precise; it is often open to different interpretations in several respects. Therefore, the EPA has decided that the best way to assess the condition of streams is through an expert panel deliberation that uses a consistent descriptive modelling approach. The panel members comprised an environmental consultant, a biologist from the biomonitoring team at the Australian Water Quality Centre (AWQC), and two biologists from the EPA (the authors of this assessment). All have at least 10 years experience in monitoring and assessing a range of streams across South Australia.

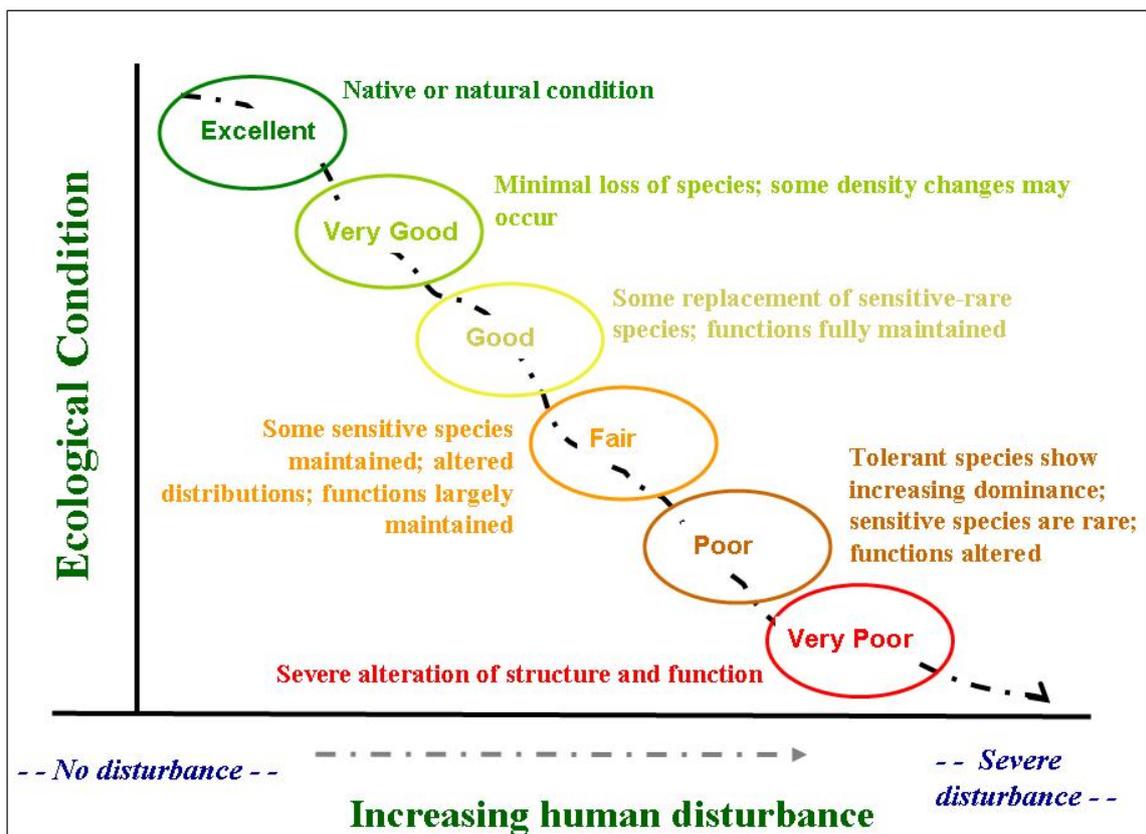
The panel members were:

- Peter Goonan, EPA (primary author)
- Tracy Corbin, EPA
- Sonia Barter, AWQC
- Chris Madden, Freshwater Macroinvertebrates.

This information sheet is a technical document that contains relatively sophisticated concepts and content. It summarises the scientific assessment of data collected from creeks and rivers in the SA Murray–Darling Basin NRM region during 2010.

## The assessment

The expert panel assessed 43 sites sampled from the eastern Mount Lofty Ranges and Fleurieu Peninsula within the SA Murray–Darling Basin NRM region during 2010. Members individually rated each site using a descriptive model for interpreting change in aquatic ecosystems in relation to increasing levels of disturbance (Davies and Jackson 2006). The assumption in this assessment is that biological (ecological) condition deteriorates as the degree of human disturbance in the catchment increases, and conversely, the best condition occurs where there is little to no human disturbance of the environment (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Human disturbance gradient showing the six different ecological condition grades or ratings ranging from excellent (best) to very poor (worst) with a brief definition of each condition

The process used to grade or rate sites involved the following steps. Firstly, a conceptual model describing the ecological responses to a general disturbance gradient in the SA Murray–Darling Basin NRM region was developed, reviewed and updated by the panel (Table 1). Secondly, a species list was compiled for the region based on data collected in 2010, describing the expected biotic assemblage for each of six possible ratings (Table 2). Thirdly, each site was given a rating based on the macroinvertebrate assemblages, vegetation assemblages and extent, water chemistry and sediment condition recorded during autumn and spring sampling periods. Lastly, the individual ratings derived by the panel members were combined to produce an overall, or final, rating for each site (Table 3).

The final reported ratings were derived by initially determining the mode rating (most common rating from the panel ratings for each site), and in cases where two ratings occurred, using a precautionary philosophy to select the poorer rating.

The ratings in the model ranged from Excellent with no human disturbances to Very Poor where major disturbances have degraded the stream to such a level that only the most tolerant species are able to survive. Some of the better condition classes were, however, not considered to be present for the SA Murray–Darling Basin NRM region in 2010 due to the extent of land clearance and lack of undisturbed, well vegetated catchments. For example, no stream in the region has remnant native vegetation covering more than 30% of the catchment, and only some of the smaller tributaries and stream segments within inaccessible rocky hills and gullies retain larger areas of native plant cover. Most streams occur in largely cleared catchments used for agriculture, and the main areas of remnant vegetation occur on hilltops, roadsides and creeklines. Consequently, the panel considered that sites from the eastern Mount Lofty Ranges (western end of the region) and Fleurieu Peninsula ranged from Very Good to Poor.

The results for the 43 sites assessed showed that one site was in a Very Good condition, five were Good , 23 were Fair and 14 were Poor (Table 3). No sites were rated as Excellent or Very Poor in 2010. In the majority of cases, the panel members assigned the same ratings (12 of 43 sites) or were within one rating class of each other (31 of 43 sites). No sites were assigned a range of different ratings by the panel greater than one rating class apart.

Table 1 Conceptual model of ecological responses to a disturbance gradient in the SA Murray-Darling Basin NRM region

Rating	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
<b>Stressor description</b>	As naturally occurs: no longer present in the region due to the level of vegetation clearance and landscape modification.	Least impacted: not common in the region due to the extent of vegetation clearance and landscape modification. Parts of the Finnis River catchment are likely to represent this condition on occasion, particularly from permanently/near permanently flowing freshwater habitats.	Best condition sites showing initial signs of nutrient enrichment: only likely to occur in parts of the Finnis River catchment on occasion due to the presence of permanently/near permanently flowing freshwater habitats. Elsewhere the level of clearance and associated agricultural development is likely to cause significant nutrient enrichment and sediment effects	Moderate nutrient enrichment: likely to commonly occur in the region due to the extent of vegetation clearance and associated agricultural development.	Gross nutrient enrichment: likely to commonly occur in the region due to the extent of vegetation clearance and associated agricultural development. Ephemeral streams in the region are likely to show extensive enrichment effects due to the lack of dilution flows.	Severely altered: may occur in the region in urban stream reaches, downstream from wastewater discharges and highly degraded ephemeral streams in agricultural settings. Sites assigned to this rating will be affected by a toxicant or other disturbance that significantly limits the diversity and abundance of aquatic life.
<b>Biological assemblages</b>	Native assemblages; usually with many rare or sensitive species present; typically high EPT <sup>1</sup> richness; no symptoms of stress and no introduced aquatic species present. Note that ephemeral habitats may have a rich fauna of colonising insects (eg beetles, waterbugs)	Best of what is left assemblages; high richness; intolerants and specialist taxa dominate abundances; may include some introduced species present in low abundances.	Typical assemblages for least impacted streams; good richness; generalist assemblage that includes at least some rare and sensitive species; emerging symptoms of stress in relation to nutrients and fine sediments; at least some remnant native vegetation present.	Impaired assemblages; generalists and tolerant taxa dominate numbers which usually includes some very abundant taxa; sensitive and rare taxa, if present, in very low numbers; usual absence of some taxa expected for the available habitats present; at least some trees present in the local catchment and banks.	Degraded assemblages; tolerants and generalists dominate but numbers usually reduced although 1–2 generalist taxa may be present in high abundances; only 1–2 rare or sensitive species present in low abundances or absent; often few or 1–2 scattered trees in the	Severely degraded assemblages with few taxa and generally low abundances; may have large numbers of one tolerant taxon such as oligochaetes, mosquito larvae, amphipods ( <i>Austrochiltonia</i> ) or chironomids (eg <i>Chironomus</i> , <i>Procladius</i> and <i>Tanytarsus</i> ); can include organic feeders

Rating	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
	and dipterans) but usually abundances of all species are low.				local catchment and banks.	from highly polluted waters such as syrphid larvae; vegetation often completely comprised introduced species with little to no remnant native vegetation.
<b>Water chemistry conditions</b>	As naturally occurs; no human contaminants present and pest species not impacting on water quality (eg nutrients, hormones).	Best condition sites with associated water quality; high proportion natural features means well oxygenated and low in nutrients and turbidity.	Largely unremarkable water quality with at least some nutrients present at higher than expected concentrations, coupled with at least one plant indicator showing emerging signs of enrichment effects (eg either chlorophyll a >10 ug/L, macrophyte cover >10% cover and/or filamentous algae >35% cover) but site not overwhelmed.	Fair water quality with generally saturated dissolved oxygen (when sampled during the day), at least one nutrient present at high concentrations and high algal and higher plant growths (eg either chlorophyll a >10 ug/L, macrophyte cover >10% cover and/or filamentous algae >35% cover) evident on occasions.	Poor water quality with generally saturated dissolved oxygen (when sampled during the day), nutrients present at high concentrations and high plant productivity evident at the site (eg usually chlorophyll a >10 ug/L, macrophyte cover >10% cover and filamentous algae >35% cover most of the time).	Very poor water quality with at least one parameter at a toxicant concentration that limits aquatic diversity; often very low dissolved oxygen and may be saline and enriched in nutrients but algal and plant growth limited.

Rating	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
<b>Physical habitat and flow patterns</b>	Natural habitat and flow patterns; no farm dams present; range sediment types and not always anaerobic.	Near natural habitat and flow regimes; mostly well vegetated catchments with few dams present; range sediment types and not always anaerobic.	Good habitat structure and flow patterns; extent of dam development has not caused an obvious loss of riffle habitats; range sediment types and not always anaerobic.	Fair habitat structure and flow patterns; many dams may be present in the catchment; anaerobic fine sediments usually present except when large algal growths present.	Poor habitat structure and flow patterns; may have many dams present in the catchment; anaerobic fine sediments usually present except when large algal growths present.	Severe modifications to physical habitat and flow patterns; little to no remnant native vegetation remaining; cleared agricultural or urban sites; anaerobic fine sediments often dominate.
<b>Human activities and sources in the catchment</b>	No obvious human disturbances but may include roads and sparse residential housing that is seweraged; no point sources and diffuse pollution not detectable by the extent of vegetation surrounding the waterway.	No significant human disturbances but may include some seweraged housing and roads; no point source discharges and diffuse pollution not obviously affecting the aquatic ecosystem due to the extent of vegetation surrounding the waterway.	Effects of human disturbance becoming obvious; point sources may be present but do not dominate flows; good riparian zones help to mitigate diffuse pollution effects.	Point and diffuse source enrichment effects evident; riparian zone not effective at mitigating nutrients and fine sediment entering waterway.	Obvious point and diffuse source enrichment effects present; unbuffered channel; major changes to catchment land use with little remnant vegetation remaining and agriculture and/or urban uses dominate.	Severe point and/or diffuse source effects that may include toxicant responses; effects dominate water quality and biological response with little signs of the original waterway evident; unbuffered channel that has undergone extreme modifications in an agricultural or urban setting.

<sup>1</sup> EPT = Ephemeroptera + Plecoptera + Trichoptera which refers to a commonly used biological index that counts the number of species and/or individuals of the mayflies, stoneflies and caddisflies collected, with these insects expected to represent the more sensitive macroinvertebrate species in a sample.

**Table 2** List of biota expected to occur for each rating in the SA Murray–Darling Basin NRM Region. Note: Excellent no longer occurs in the region.

Rating	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
<b>Attribute 1*: Rare and/or regionally endemic</b>	<b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Tasmanophlebia</i> ; <b>Trichoptera</b> <i>Ethochorema</i> , <i>Ulmerochorema</i> , <b>Fish</b> <i>Galaxias brevipinnis</i> , <i>Galaxias olidus</i>	<b>Odonata</b> <i>Nososticta</i> ; <b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Tasmanophlebia</i> ; <b>Trichoptera</b> <i>Ethochorema</i> , <i>Ulmerochorema</i> ; <b>Fish</b> <i>Galaxias brevipinnis</i> , <i>Galaxias olidus</i>	<b>Odonata</b> <i>Nososticta</i> ; <b>Fish</b> <i>Galaxias brevipinnis</i> , <i>Galaxias olidus</i>	None present	None present
<b>Attribute 2: Sensitive, rare or vulnerable specialist taxa with narrow environmental requirements</b>	<b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Offadens</i> ; <b>Plecoptera</b> <i>Leptoperla</i> , <i>Illiesoperla</i> , <i>Riekoperla</i> , <i>Austrocerca</i> ; <b>Trichoptera</b> <i>Orthotrichia bishopi</i> , <i>Lingora</i> <i>sp AV1</i> , <i>Notalina fulva</i> , <i>Triplectides similis</i> , <i>Atriplectides</i> , <i>Taschorema</i> <i>evansi</i> ; <b>Diptera</b> <i>Austrosimulium</i> , <i>Paracnephia</i> ; <b>Hemiptera</b> <i>Hydrometra</i>	<b>Coleoptera</b> <i>Laccophilus</i> ; <b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Offadens</i> ; <b>Plecoptera</b> <i>Illiesoperla</i> , <i>Riekoperla</i> , <i>Austrocerca</i> ; <b>Trichoptera</b> <i>Orthotrichia</i> <i>bishopi</i> , <i>Lingora sp. AV1</i> , <i>Notalina fulva</i> , <i>Triplectides</i> <i>similis</i> , <i>Atriplectides</i> , <i>Taschorema evansi</i> ; <b>Diptera</b> <i>Austrosimulium</i> , <i>Paracnephia</i> ; <b>Hemiptera</b> <i>Hydrometra</i>	<b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Offadens</i> ; <b>Trichoptera</b> <i>Lingora sp.</i> <i>AV1</i> , <i>Taschorema evansi</i> ; <b>Diptera</b> <i>Austrosimulium</i>	None present	None present
<b>Attribute 3: Sensitive, ubiquitous taxa</b>	<b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Koornonga</i> , <i>Atalophlebia</i> ; <b>Plecoptera</b> <i>Dinotoperla</i>	<b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Koornonga</i> , <i>Atalophlebia</i> ; <b>Plecoptera</b> <i>Dinotoperla</i>	<b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Koornonga</i> , <i>Atalophlebia</i>	<b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Atalophlebia</i>	None present in region
<b>Attribute 4: Opportunistic or generalist taxa</b>	<b>Mollusca</b> <i>Angrobia</i> , <i>Glyptophysa</i> ; <b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Cloeon</i> , <i>Tasmanocoenis</i> ; <b>Trichoptera</b> <i>Notalina</i> , <i>Oecetis</i> , <i>Triplectides</i> ,	<b>Mollusca</b> <i>Angrobia</i> , <i>Glyptophysa</i> ; <b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Cloeon</i> , <i>Tasmanocoenis</i> ; <b>Trichoptera</b> <i>Notalina</i> , <i>Oecetis</i> , <i>Triplectides</i> , <i>Hellyethira</i> , <i>Lectrides</i> ;	<b>Mollusca</b> <i>Angrobia</i> , <i>Glyptophysa</i> ; <b>Ephemeroptera</b> <i>Cloeon</i> , <i>Tasmanocoenis</i> ; <b>Trichoptera</b> <i>Notalina</i> , <i>Oecetis</i> , <i>Triplectides</i> ,	<b>Mollusca</b> <i>Angrobia</i> , <i>Glyptophysa</i> ; <b>Ephemeroptera</b> (in low numbers) <i>Cloeon</i> , <i>Tasmanocoenis</i> ; <b>Trichoptera</b>	<b>Coleoptera</b> <i>Necterosoma</i>

Rating	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
	<i>Hellyethira</i> , <i>Lectrides</i> ; <b>Odonata</b> Coenagrionidae ( <i>Xanthagrion</i> , <i>Austroagrion</i> ), <i>Austrolestes</i> , <i>Hemicordulia</i> , <i>Aeschnidae</i> , <i>Telephlebiidae</i> ; <b>Diptera</b> Dixidae, Chironomids ( <i>Eukiefferiella</i> , <i>Thienemaniella</i> , <i>Rheotanytarsus</i> ); <b>Coleoptera</b> <i>Chostonectes</i> , <i>Limnoxenus</i> , <i>Macrogyrus</i> , <i>Aulonogyrus</i>	<b>Odonata</b> Coenagrionidae ( <i>Xanthagrion</i> , <i>Austroagrion</i> ), <i>Austrolestes</i> , <i>Hemicordulia</i> , <i>Aeschnidae</i> , <i>Telephlebiidae</i> ; <b>Diptera</b> Dixidae, <i>Alluauadomyia</i> , Chironomids ( <i>Eukiefferiella</i> , <i>Thienemaniella</i> , <i>Cladotanytarsus</i> , <i>Rheotanytarsus</i> ); <b>Coleoptera</b> <i>Sternopriscus</i> , <i>Chostonectes</i> , <i>Limnoxenus</i> , <i>Macrogyrus</i> , <i>Aulonogyrus</i> , <i>Platynectes</i>	<i>Hellyethira</i> , <i>Lectrides</i> ; <b>Odonata</b> <i>Austrolestes</i> , <i>Hemicordulia</i> ; <b>Diptera</b> Dixidae, <i>Alluauadomyia</i> , Chironomids ( <i>Thienemaniella</i> , <i>Cladotanytarsus</i> , <i>Rheotanytarsus</i> ); <b>Coleoptera</b> <i>Sternopriscus</i> , <i>Chostonectes</i> , <i>Limnoxenus</i> , <i>Macrogyrus</i> , <i>Aulonogyrus</i> , <i>Platynectes</i>	<i>Triplectides</i> , <i>Hellyethira</i> ; <b>Odonata</b> <i>Austrolestes</i> , <i>Hemicordulia</i> ; <b>Diptera</b> Chironomids ( <i>Tanytarsus</i> ); <b>Coleoptera</b> <i>Sternopriscus</i> , <i>Necterosoma</i> , <i>Platynectes</i>	
<b>Attribute 5: Tolerant taxa</b>	<b>Oligochaeta; Amphipoda</b> <i>Austrochiltonia</i> ; <b>Odonata</b> <i>Ischnura</i>	<b>Oligochaeta; Amphipoda</b> <i>Austrochiltonia</i> ; <b>Decapoda</b> <i>Paratya</i> , <i>Cherax</i> ; <b>Diptera</b> <i>Simulium</i> , Culicidae, Stratiomyidae, Ceratopogonidae, <i>Cricotopus</i> ; <b>Odonata</b> <i>Ischnura</i>	<b>Turbellaria; Oligochaeta;</b> <b>Mollusca</b> Hydrobiidae; <b>Amphipoda</b> <i>Austrochiltonia</i> ; <b>Decapoda</b> <i>Paratya</i> , <i>Cherax</i> ; <b>Collembola; Diptera</b> <i>Simulium</i> , Culicidae, <i>Cricotopus</i> ; <b>Hemiptera</b> <i>Micronecta</i> , <i>Sigara</i> , <i>Agraptocorixa</i> , <i>Anisops</i> , <i>Enithares</i> ; <b>Odonata</b> <i>Ischnura</i>	<b>Turbellaria;</b> <b>Oligochaeta; Mollusca</b> Hydrobiidae; <b>Amphipoda</b> <i>Austrochiltonia</i> ; <b>Decapoda</b> <i>Paratya</i> , <i>Cherax</i> ; <b>Collembola</b> ; <b>Diptera</b> <i>Simulium</i> , Culicidae, Ceratopogonidae, <i>Cricotopus</i> , Ephydriidae, Stratiomyidae; <b>Hemiptera</b> <i>Micronecta</i> , <i>Sigara</i> , <i>Agraptocorixa</i> , <i>Anisops</i> , <i>Enithares</i> ; <b>Odonata</b> <i>Ischnura</i>	<b>Oligochaeta</b> (often in large numbers); <b>Amphipoda</b> <i>Austrochiltonia</i> ; <b>Collembola; Diptera</b> <i>Procladius</i> , <i>Chironomus</i> (often in large numbers), Culicidae, Ceratopogonidae, Stratiomyidae; <b>Hemiptera</b> <i>Micronecta</i> , <i>Anisops</i>
<b>Attribute 6: Non-endemic or introduced taxa</b>	<b>Mollusca</b> <i>Physa</i> , <i>Potamopyrgus</i> in low numbers.	<b>Mollusca</b> <i>Physa</i> , <i>Potamopyrgus</i> in low numbers.	<b>Mollusca</b> <i>Physa</i> , <i>Potamopyrgus</i> ; <b>Fish</b> <i>Gambusia</i>	<b>Mollusca</b> <i>Physa</i> , <i>Potamopyrgus</i> ; <b>Fish</b> <i>Gambusia</i>	<b>Mollusca</b> <i>Physa</i> ; <b>Fish</b> <i>Gambusia</i> (rarely due to poor water quality)

**Table 3 Ratings given by each panel member and final overall rating for each of the 43 sites monitored in the SA Murray–Darling Basin NRM region during 2010**

Site name	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor	Final rating
Tookayerta Creek, near Nangkita	3	1				Very Good
Blackfellows Creek, near Mount Magnificent Conservation Park		4				Good
Bull Creek, near Ashbourne		4				Good
Finniss River, near Mount Observation		3	1			Good
Finniss River, near Yundi		3	1			Good
Tookayerta Creek, near Mount Compass	1	3				Good
Angas River, near Strathalbyn		2	2			Fair
Baker Creek, near Kitticoola Mine		2	2			Fair
Bremer River, near Callington			4			Fair
Bremer River, near Harrogate			4			Fair
Burra Creek, near Worlds End		1	3			Fair
Currency Creek, near Currency Creek			3	1		Fair
Currency Creek, near Mosquito Hill			4			Fair
Currency Creek, near Scott Conservation Park		2	2			Fair
Dawson Creek, near Strathalbyn			4			Fair
Finniss River, near Finniss			4			Fair
Giles Creek, near Finniss			4			Fair
Harrison Creek, near Kitticoola Mine		2	2			Fair
Levi Creek, near Frankton		1	3			Fair
Marne River, near Cambrai			3	1		Fair
Meadows Creek, near Kuitpo Forest			4			Fair
Nairne Creek, Nairne			3	1		Fair
Pine Creek, near Dutton			3	1		Fair
Reedy Creek, near Caloote			3	1		Fair
Saunders Creek, near Sanderston			4			Fair
Somme Creek, near Eden Valley			4			Fair
Stone Chimney Creek, near Red Banks Conservation Park			3	1		Fair

Site Name	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor	Final grade
Tookayerta Creek, near Mount Observation		1	3			Fair
Truro Creek, near Accommodation Hill			3	1		Fair
Baldina Creek, near Baldina Station				4		Poor
Gorge Creek, near Tepko			1	3		Poor
Kanappa Creek, near Kanappa Hill			2	2		Poor
Logan Creek, near Logan Gap				3	1	Poor
Marne River, near Walker Flat				3	1	Poor
Middle Creek, near Strathalbyn			1	3		Poor
Mitchell Gully Creek, near Rockleigh			1	3		Poor
Mosquito Creek, near Langhorne Creek			2	2		Poor
Mt Barker Creek, near Mount Barker			2	2		Poor
One Tree Hill Creek, near Springton			1	3		Poor
Paris Creek, south of Macclesfield			2	2		Poor
Rodwell Creek, near Wheal Ellen mine			1	3		Poor
Salt Creek, near Rockleigh				4		Poor
Turvey's Drain, near Milang			1	3		Poor

## Reference

Davies SP and SK Jackson 2006, 'The biological condition gradient: a descriptive model for interpreting change in aquatic ecosystems', *Ecological Applications*, Volume 16, pp 1251–1266.

## Further information

### Legislation

Legislation may be viewed on the Internet at: <[www.legislation.sa.gov.au](http://www.legislation.sa.gov.au)>

Copies of legislation are available for purchase from:

Service SA Government Legislation Outlet  
Adelaide Service SA Centre  
108 North Terrace  
Adelaide SA 5000

Telephone: 13 23 24  
Facsimile: (08) 8204 1909  
Website: <[shop.service.sa.gov.au](http://shop.service.sa.gov.au)>

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