

21.01 MUNICIPAL PROFILE

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21.01-1 Location and Features

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The Shire of Hindmarsh is located in the Wimmera and Mallee regions in Western Victoria, a prime grain growing and agriculture area. The Shire is bordered by West Wimmera Shire to the west and south, the Rural City of Horsham to the south, Yarriambiack Shire to the east and the Rural City of Mildura to the north. Occupying an area of approximately 7,422 square kilometres, the Shire of Hindmarsh is one of the largest municipalities in Victoria. Despite its size however, the Shire has a small and decreasing population (7,088 persons ERP, 1996 ABS). A snap shot of the Shire is also illustrated in Figure 1.

The Shire was formed in January 1995 by the municipal amalgamation of the former Shires of Dimboola and Lowan. The administrative headquarters are located at Nhill which is located on both the Western Highway and National Rail line approximately half way between Melbourne and Adelaide. Customer service offices are also located in Dimboola, Rainbow and Jeparit. In 1998 the Shire had a rate revenue of about \$2.4 million, assets to the value of some \$22 million and a total expenditure of \$7.5 million.

The Shire is predominantly rural based with a focus on a wide range of cereal, legume and oil seed cropping, with some wool production and grazing. While landholders diversify their operations, Council believes there are opportunities for further development within the municipality.

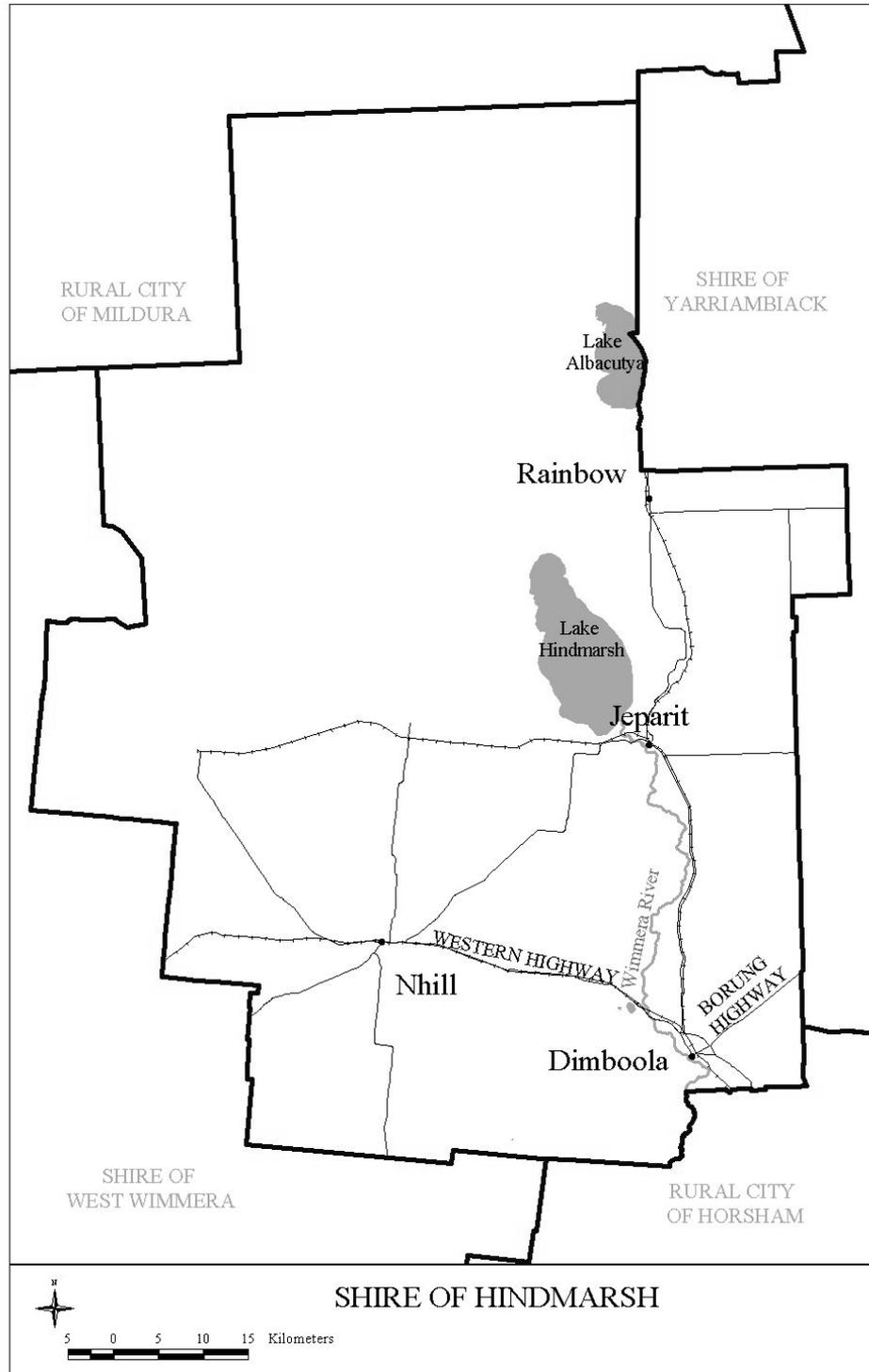
The agricultural areas are bounded to the north by the Wyperfeld and Big Desert National Parks, and to the south by the Little Desert National Park. The Shire contains a number of significant, rare and threatened flora and fauna species and major lakes and wetlands which are significant for both environmental and economic reasons.

Key features of the Shire include the Little Desert National Park in the south and the Wyperfeld and Big Desert National Parks in the northern part of the Shire, and the Wimmera River. The Wimmera River flows from the Grampians, Mt Cole and the Pyrenees Range to the south and south east of the Shire, and terminates in Lake Hindmarsh, Lake Albacutya and Wyperfeld National Park. Changes in water management, particularly the construction of storage dams, have resulted in reduced flows down the Wimmera River such that Lake Albacutya is now almost permanently dry, having last filled in 1974 after two very wet seasons. When full, Lake Hindmarsh is the largest natural freshwater body in Victoria.

Landforms which characterise the Shire consist of low irregular undulating plains with pronounced ridges and occasional dunes, a significant wetland system, and the expansive floodplain of the Wimmera River. Native vegetation includes a mixture of open woodland forests of Stringy-bark, Yellow Gum, Buloke and Black Box etc.

There is an annual average rainfall across the Municipality of 300 to 450 mm which provides a semi-arid climate. In the north little surface drainage is evident aside from the Wimmera River, with most of the rainfall being lost through evaporation and percolation.

Although the majority of public land holdings comprise national and state parks, there are smaller parcels of forested and cleared land, lakes, wetlands and reservoirs, and linear roadside reserves. Public land is used for recreation, both passive and active, and also supports important localised, remnant ecosystems. The private land in the Shire has been substantially altered during the past 150 years but still contains small pockets of remnant habitat, wetlands and other original features. These areas have become increasingly important with the realisation that only 3% of the original vegetation remains intact. The preservation of roadside vegetation is also important in this context as it often forms corridors for fauna particularly between more substantial areas of native vegetation eg. The Big and Little Deserts. "Project Hindmarsh" is a Nationally significant revegetation initiative being undertaken by the Shire.



21.01-2 Historical Development

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Prior to European settlement, the Shire was occupied by the Wotjobaluk tribe, with the Wimmera River providing essential water, hunting grounds and trade routes in an otherwise arid landscape. The area was first visited by Europeans in 1844. By the 1870's European settlement was well established in the Shire.

The impact of European settlement on the Aboriginal population was immediate and great, and resulted in a rapid decline of Aboriginals throughout western Victoria by the late 1870s.

When the mining boom quietened in the 1860s the Land Act, 1869 was proclaimed which allowed settlers of limited means to select and eventually purchase up to 320 acres (130 hectares) for farming, largely wheat growing and grazing within proclaimed areas, provided condition of residence and improvement were met.

Agriculture expanded and diversified in the late 19th Century, despite periodic economic depressions and natural adversities such as floods, drought and disease. Initial activities focused on wheat and sheep production.

Secondary industries also developed, especially to serve agriculture and mining. They included blacksmiths, quarries, sawmills, tanneries and flour mills. After both world wars, government sponsored 'closer settlement' and 'soldier settlement' schemes which enabled a large numbers of small farmers to establish themselves on the land.

21.01-3 Population Characteristics

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The 1996 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census recorded an estimated resident population (ERP) of 6864 in Hindmarsh Shire. The population of the two main centres, Nhill and Dimboola, was about 1900 and 1585 respectively, with the rural areas and small townships accounting for the balance of the Shire's total population.

Over recent years an annual population loss of over one percent has been experienced throughout the Shire. More specifically, the Shire's population has declined to present levels from 7890 people in 1981, 7318 people in 1986 and 6909 people in 1991. This represents a decrease of 13% over the fifteen year period, which compares to a 5.77% population decline for the Wimmera Region as a whole (comprising Horsham Rural City, Hindmarsh Shire, Yarriambiack Shire and West Wimmera Shire). The population decline reflects the changes in the structure of agriculture, the steady increase in average farm size and the search for better education and employment opportunities.

21.01-4 Towns and Villages

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The predominant service centres in the Hindmarsh Shire are Nhill, Dimboola, Rainbow and Jeparit. There are also a number of smaller villages located throughout the Shire which include Kiata, Gerang, Antwerp, Netherby and Yanac.

Nhill is located half-way between Melbourne and Adelaide on the Western Highway and Melbourne – Adelaide rail line. It plays an important role as a service and business centre for the local community, travellers on the Western Highway and the surrounding rural hinterland. The town contains a number of substantial manufacturing and processing establishments and smaller industrial businesses, and also has a number of notable places of heritage significance. The name Nhill is an Aboriginal word meaning 'early morning mist rising over water'.

Dimboola is the second largest township, located on the Wimmera River and is the eastern gateway to the Little Desert. Like Nhill it has also retained a significant number of original buildings which set the historic character of the town centre. The town is now by passed by the Western Highway, but is passed through by the Melbourne Adelaide National rail line.

Dimboola is well catered for with community facilities and services and contains a number of places of heritage significance.

Rainbow is a picturesque town with a population of 562 (ABS, 1996). The town gives ready access to Lake Hindmarsh, Lake Albacutya and the Big Desert. Like Jeparit, it has a quaint old-world charm and rural character, which is largely attributed to the number of sites of architectural or historic significance. There is no significant industrial activity located in Rainbow and there is low or no growth pressure.

Jeparit is located on the Wimmera River, 6 kilometres from Lake Hindmarsh, Victoria's largest freshwater lake. It is the birthplace of Australia's longest serving Prime Minister, the late Sir Robert Menzies. The town is a service centre for the local and surrounding rural community and has a quaint old-world charm and rural character, which is largely attributed to the number of sites of architectural or historic significance. Jeparit contains a number of historical items in the Wimmera Mallee Pioneers' Museum. There is no significant industrial activity located in Jeparit and there is low or no growth pressure likely.

In addition to the above main towns, there are a number of smaller townships located throughout the Shire which provide a local convenience shopping role and an important community focus.

21.01-5 Agriculture

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The Hindmarsh Shire has traditionally been one of Victoria's most productive and enterprising regions, particularly in the area of agriculture. The Shire is a cropping based area producing barley, wheat, legumes and oil seeds. Wool and livestock production also contribute significantly to the agricultural base. The traditional agricultural industries of cereal, livestock and wool production helped establish the foundation for these farming areas. However, recent shifts in the market fortunes of livestock and particularly wool, have seen a marked drop in agricultural income from these industries, resulting in an increased reliance on grain production. While it is recognised that the Hindmarsh Shire is an agriculturally based Shire, opportunities for expansion into other areas of production and processes are also being undertaken and pursued.

21.01-6 Economic Development

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Hindmarsh Shire is one of Victoria's most productive and enterprising regions, particularly in the area of agriculture. The local economy is directly affected by the fortunes of the rural industry. Producer margins for farmers have been generally decreasing since 1982. Farms are getting bigger to become more viable, which has led to less demand on the small rural towns that service them. While the traditional agricultural pursuits such as cropping, grazing and wool have largely formed the basis of the economy of Hindmarsh, diversity in production is actively being pursued. Taking advantage of the Shire's natural resource attributes has enabled new investment in production as diverse as pasture seed, and value adding by such firms as Luv a Duck and Lowan Whole Foods.

There are numerous small businesses, community services such as hospitals and schools and a number of larger business activities well established in the Shire including: Little Desert Tours, Sherwell Holdings Pty Ltd (manufacture of tanks and silos), Revell Seeds, Jaeschke's, 'Luv a Duck' and Lowan Whole Foods. These industries significantly contribute to the local and wider economy of the Shire and the region generally. The Australian Wheat Board is currently building a major grain storage and handling facility.

The West Wimmera Health Service is a major employer in Nhill, providing health care throughout the West Wimmera.

Further diversity in the economic base, employment and business opportunities is also actively being pursued through the establishment of new industries and agriculturally linked value added industries together with the continuing expansion of tourism, recreation and leisure opportunities provided in the Shire.

Currently there are many tourism organisations in the Shire which have been established by the community. These local tourism organisations are generally in the early stages of development and links between voluntary associations, tourism operators and the local and regional marketing organisations are being established. The municipality possesses a number of world class natural tourist attractions and features together with a number of recreation and leisure facilities and attractions in townships. Accommodation, catering and camping facilities are also available throughout the Shire.

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Environment

The Hindmarsh Shire contains many areas which have significant natural landscapes and features of environmental value, including natural wetlands and waterways, rare and threatened flora and fauna species, archaeological and historic features. A significant proportion of the Shire is public land hosting native vegetation and wildlife habitat. There are also numerous areas of natural vegetation and environmental values located on private land, and small areas such as narrow reserves along streams, roadsides and railways and nature reserves. These areas host native vegetation, contribute to nature conservation, and are valuable for flora and fauna habitat and as wildlife corridors for fauna.

The Little Desert National Park has significant variations in physiography, soils and climate and provides a diversity of environs and habitats. The Little Desert National Park is readily accessible from both Dimboola and Nhill. The Wyperfeld and Big Desert National Parks are located in the northern part of the Shire and is a vast park of 113,500 hectares. The diversity and complexity of the landscape is the essence of its attraction. Council supports the local Landcare and tree groups in their endeavours to revegetate the wildlife corridors to relink the Big and Little Deserts.

The Wimmera River flows through the Shire. The section of the Wimmera River which flows through the municipality is declared as the Wimmera River Heritage Area pursuant to the Heritage Rivers Act 1992. The flow regime through the Wimmera river corridor has been considerably modified and the maintenance of some down river instream, riparian and floodplain values is at risk. Above Jeparit, the river is slow-flowing, its water warm, the river-bed sandy and long deep pools separated by sandy bars are a common feature. Some sections of the river, such as immediately south of Dimboola and north of Lake Hindmarsh are surrounded by extensive native vegetation. Elsewhere a narrow riparian strip of vegetation is all that exists in an area that has been substantially cleared for agriculture. Flowing through such dry country the river is a corridor of life. Its lake system is a key feature of the river. Lake Hindmarsh is the first of a series of terminal lakes, ending in Wyperfield National Park. When Lake Hindmarsh fills, water flows along Outlet Creek and into Lake Albacutya, an internationally acclaimed wetland under the international Ramsar convention. When Lake Hindmarsh is full it is the largest natural freshwater body in Victoria.

Hindmarsh Shire is within the Mallee and Wimmera catchments and catchment management is a growing issue. Key environmental management issues include control of soil erosion and salinity, loss of native vegetation and habitat, pollution of the water catchment and changes to drainage patterns. Private land holdings can make a substantial contribution to better managing these problems.

While all forms of erosion occur in the Shire, wind erosion causes the greatest problem. This can be severe when hot, dry winds remove top soil from fallow or overgrazed land. Salinity is present due to historical removal of indigenous vegetation and extensive water harvesting and redistribution. The extent and distribution of salinity is not yet known in detail, however recharge occurs all over the Shire and most discharge is saline. Salt occurrence is evident in a band west of the Wimmera River and in the vicinity of Lake Hindmarsh. It is also prevalent in small patches throughout the Shire.

Land clearing and poor land management practices have affected waterways. These have become contaminated through farm and streambank clearance, nutrient and soil runoff, increasing salinity and waste or effluent discharge, thereby reducing both their ecological and economic value. Changes to natural drainage patterns have exacerbated flooding of

rivers and creeks, diverted water from wetlands and have had a dramatic negative effect on some farm operations.