

# Fingerboards Critical Minerals Project Community Reference Group (CRG) Meeting #5 Notes

**Meeting Date:** Thursday, 11 Dec 2025

**Meeting Time:** 12:00 PM to 4:00 PM

**Meeting Location:** Quest, Bairnsdale

**Independent Chair:** John Mitchell

**GCM Project Team Attendees:** Michelle Wood, Stefan Wolmarans, Ryan Leslie, Mick Harrington, Allison Heskey, Janet Robertson, Murray Holland, Bryan Chadwick (AECOM), Loretta Fallaw, Pat Harton

**CRG Member Attendees:** Alfred Chown (AC), Cr Geoff Wells (GW; Wellington Shire Council), David Radford (DR; East Gippsland Water), Graham Watt (GW), Jillian Stewart (JS), Lionel Rose (LR), Rohan Reynolds (RR), Tess Coverdale (TC), Trevor Hancock (TH), Vesna Rendulic (VR).

**CRG Member Apologies:** John Alexander (JA), Carolyn Cameron (JC), Joshua Nelson (JN), Simon Padfield (SP), Peter Reefman (PR), Andrew Sheridan (AS).

**Observers:** Grant Clark (Resources Victoria), Natarsha Richards (RDV), Prue McTaggart (EGSC)

**Attachments:** CRG Meeting\_5 Presentation\_11Dec2025, Draft EES Self-Referral Maps, Fingerboards EES Abbreviations & Glossary V1.0.

## Meeting Summary

The fifth meeting of the Community Reference Group focused on:

- Project progress
- Confirmation of key regulatory milestones including that the Mining and Rehabilitation Demonstration Pit (MRDP) Work Plan, which was approved on 4 December 2025
- Detailed briefing on the Environment Effects Act (EE Act) self-referral process
- Community engagement activities and key issues being raised by stakeholders
- Proposed engagement program for 2026, including the establishment of thematic working groups.

## **1. Welcome, Introductions, and Acknowledgement of Country**

Chairperson John Mitchell opened the fifth meeting of the Community Reference Group (CRG) at 12:00 PM, welcoming project team members, CRG members and observers. Attendees introduced themselves.

John called for any questions or concerns regarding the accuracy of Meeting #4's Meeting Notes and RR stated that they did not record that Appian's Kieran Beck, Head of Australia had been asked whether Appian representatives would be prepared to meet with local farmers at Fingerboards directly. In Meeting #4, Kieran answered by stating that GCM's management team is responsible for engaging directly with these key stakeholders and that Appian would provide support and advice to GCM Management as appropriate. All members were happy for this to be recorded in Meeting #5 meeting notes.

John emphasised that members of the CRG have a responsibility to make sure that the meeting notes accurately reflect and record the points of discussion.

## **2. Project Update**

**Presenter:** Michelle Wood, GCM CEO

Michelle provided an update on project progress and key regulatory and technical milestones achieved in 2025. She advised that GCM had met all Retention Licence Year 3 milestones and commenced Year 4 milestones.

Key updates included:

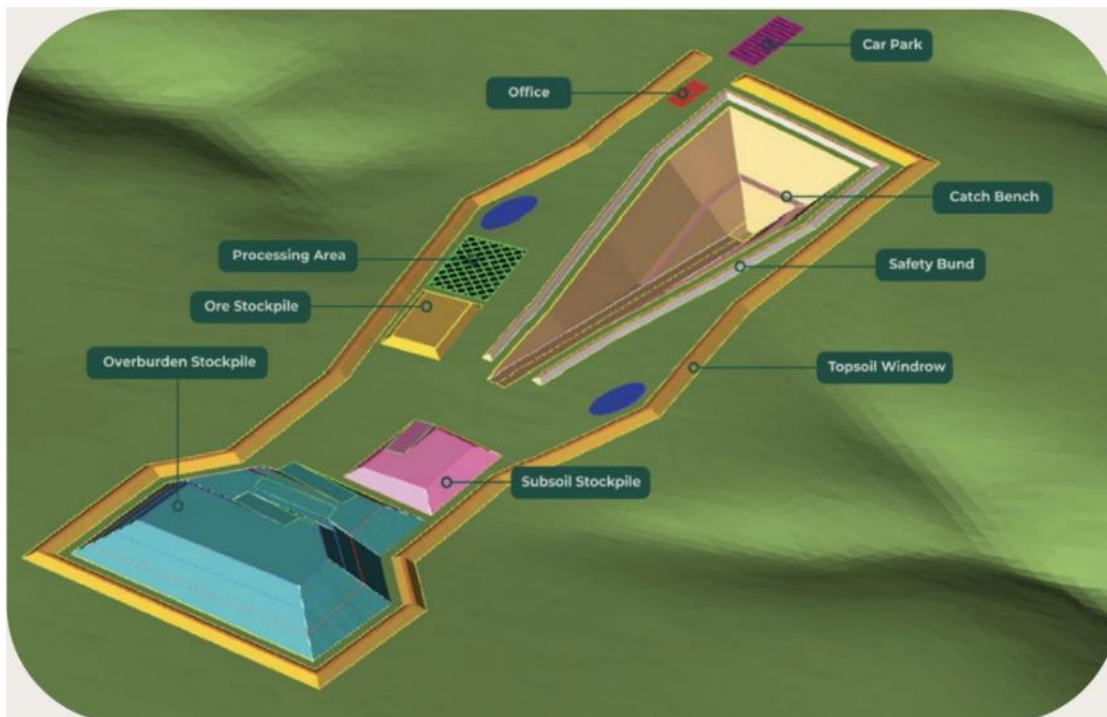
- Submission of a draft EE Act self-referral in September 2025, receipt of agency feedback in November, and submission of an updated referral in December. It is currently with the Impact Assessment Unit for review who requested more information about how impacts previously identified had been addressed in the new project design.
- Approval of the Mining and Rehabilitation Demonstration Pit (MRDP) Work Plan was received on 4 December 2025, subject to conditions, including statutory authorisations and maintenance of a radiation management licence. Construction of the MRDP will begin early 2026.
- Advancement of the Concept Definition Study toward pre-feasibility.
- Establishment of the Rail Freight Taskforce to progress a credible rail-based freight pathway and kick off a study of demand.
- Expansion of baseline monitoring programs, including additional weather stations, dust monitoring, and quarterly water sampling.
- The significance of the heavy rare earth deposit and no plans for Chinese offtakes gives Fingerboards its competitive advantage, with planned supply to NT and WA and potentially the US with the AUKUS Deal.
- Confirmation of tailings and rehabilitation test work parameters, including in-pit co-

disposal and water recovery.

- The most recent sentiment analysis reported 49.8% in support of the project, 30% oppose the project – in line with previous surveys.
- The Government wants to see Community Benefits evolve in year 4 of the retention licence and First Nations to be a key focus.
- GCM is at the very early stages of engagement with GLaWAC. No specific benefits have been discussed with GLaWAC and the Board of GLaWAC had yet to be briefed on the project in detail.
- With reference to the map on page 10 of the presentation, key project changes were highlighted, and members were encouraged to view the layered map on the GCM website. Michelle emphasised the smaller mine voids to enable quicker rehabilitation and reduce dust.
- Tailings Management: Stefan explained that there are two tailing streams that are generated, one that goes into the separating plant minus the fines (fine silts and clays), and at the back end of the plant, the sand tailings (coarser fraction). In the previous proposal, those were kept separate, where the fines were treated through centrifuges and the tailings went back into the voids as sand tailings. In the new proposal, the fines and coarse grains are re-combined back into the same proportions that existed when taken out of the ground, pumping a single slurry back into the voids, which makes it easier to recover water and faster to rehabilitation because we're working with one area rather than two.
- The GCM website has a concordance table that details how GCM is addressing the 49 recommendations of the previous EES.
- Victorian mining approvals to provide context on regulatory pathways/timeframes.

#### **Key Discussion Points:**

- LR questioned the size of the demonstration pit at 0.9 hectares, yet documents say that GCM will rehabilitate 3.5 hectares. Stefan explained that the material removed from the pit will form bunding and stockpiles and that 3.5 hectares covers the full area of disturbance, which requires removal (and reinstatement) of top soil and subsoils, followed by full rehabilitation. Pat Harton later stated that the area inside the topsoil windrow on page 9 (extract below) of the presentation represents 3.5 hectares.



- RR asked if it's a conscious effort for GCM not to be Chinese-owned. Michelle said yes – outlining that GCM's Australian (REZir) and UK (Appian) ownership and that the US is demanding critical minerals.
- Prue (EGSC) asked if when GCM gets to the point of operation of the mine, whether GCM would be seeking new investments to be able to move into that phase. Michelle stated that Appian has given GCM enough money to build some of the mine but some of it would be funded by debt.
- LR about reporting related to milestones applying to RL2023, asking if GCM still holds RL2023 and, if not, why has it not been rescinded if the milestones haven't been met. Michelle later confirmed that GCM holds RL2023 which is contained within RL2026 stating that GCM has been reporting on RL2023 through the quarterly reports as the milestones and the milestones for Year 3 are the same.
- Chairperson John recommended that GCM has a legend to explain the meaning of the green dots against the Year 3 and Year 4 milestone status (on slide 8 of the presentation). Michelle explained that the green colour in Year 3 indicated 'completion' and the green in Year 4 indicated being 'on track' but acknowledged potential confusion and committed to a clearer definition in future milestone reporting.
- JS asked how long the section of the Bairnsdale-Dargo road will be diverted. Stefan stated that it's not a 'construction detour', but a full standard public road. The diversion and relocation will be more than 5 years and less than 10. GW asked that if the diverted road became popular with the locals and it worked well, would there be public consultation to keep it in place. Stefan confirmed that the road must be

relocated as progressive mining is required under both the original/re-instated and the diverted/temporary road.

### **3. Self-referral Update**

**Presenter:** Bryan Chadwick (AECOM), Lead Environmental Consultant

Bryan provided a detailed briefing on the Environment Effects Act 1978 (Vic) self-referral process, including its purpose, statutory context, and relevance to the Fingerboards Project.

Key points included:

- The self-referral is a condition of GCM's Retention Licence. The referral allows the Minister for Planning to determine whether an Environment Effects Statement (EES) or another form of assessment is required.
- The Environmental Effects Act (EE Act) considers environmental effects broadly, including physical, biological, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual values.
- Referral criteria under the Ministerial Guidelines includes potential impacts on native vegetation, water resources, human health, and greenhouse gas emissions.
- The State Government has issued a mandate that any EES process needs to be completed within 18 months. There's a drive from project proponents and community members that the long EES process causes stress.
- EE Act referral content including the project proponent details, project description and rationale, and potential environmental effects is to be assessed.
- Water supply options under consideration include water trading, recycled water, GLaWAC surface water, and groundwater. The project will require 3GL per annum.

Bryan explained the differences between the Victorian EE Act and the Commonwealth EPBC Act, noting the role of bilateral agreements and recent EPBC Act reforms passed in November 2025.

The referral process to date was outlined, including:

- Draft referral submission on 25 September 2025.
- Receipt of agency comments on 21 November 2025.
- Submission of an updated referral on 5 December 2025.
- Waiting on the Minister's decision.

Indicative next steps and timelines were discussed, including referral acceptance and publication, the Minister's decision, potential scoping requirements, and opportunities for public input during exhibition phases.

#### **Key Discussion Points:**

- John Mitchell asked if the reform bill have requirements for sunset periods, noting that at the end of last year, 75% of renewable energy proponents were still waiting for a response. Bryan noted the complexity of the process and potential delays and that

best practice is to address as many potential impacts as possible in the referral.

- What does public comment look like if the referral is accepted? Once the referral is formally accepted it gets published on [Planning Victoria's website](#) and stays on the website for 1-2 months until the Minister makes her decision on whether it's a full EES. The Minister's decision and reasons are published on the website. Following this, GCM will enter the process of drafting the scoping requirements. GCM has to advertise in a local and regional paper and on its website 1-2 weeks prior to the scoping requirements going on exhibition. Then members of the community, individuals, agencies etc. have 15 business days to comment on the draft scoping requirements.
- RR asked if all those submissions would be available to see online. Bryan answered no, stating that the submissions go to the department and not the proponent, however the proponent is provided with a summary. The proponent has no advocacy position and can put in a submission.
- John Mitchell asked if secondary environmental benefits arising from being a supplier of critical minerals to the renewable sector factored in impact assessments. Bryan stated that such benefits form part of the project rationale but do not form part of the direct impacts assessed such as project energy effects/footprint.
- RR asked if the project is getting any water from the Mitchell River. Bryan stated that in terms of the referral, we're only detailing the supply options, not the quantity from each source.
- RR asked what a 'work plan variation' is. Bryan stated that a work plan is what ultimately gets approved by the Resources Minister under the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Act (the MRSDA). For example - a variation is something that you might want to change how you deliver the project within the boundaries of an EES, such as changing the mining sequence. You cannot get a work plan variation for a project that has gone through an EES if it sits outside of what was assessed.
- Geoff asked if the new flood overlays have been factored into the design and impact assessment, to which Bryan stated they had been.

#### **Key Actions / Next Steps:**

- GCM to provide details of the work plan variation process including links to government websites.

## **4. Community Engagement Update**

Mick Harrington, GCM East Gippsland Community & Stakeholder Engagement Lead

Mick provided an update on recent engagement activities and emerging themes from stakeholder discussions. He stated that he has an open-door policy and is keen to engage with any community member whether they support or oppose the project to gain all perspectives.

Engagement methods included:

- Drop-in sessions
- High-traffic event/retail visits
- Setting up Fernbank as a hyper-local meeting place
- In-office meetings
- Stakeholder briefings
- Industry roundtables
- Proactive outreach to landholders and community groups
- Demonstration Pit tours

Key stakeholders engaged included local landholders, Lindenow Valley horticulture representatives, local MPs, the Victorian Farmers Federation, local government, and residents of nearby towns.

GCM will be adding high-traffic visits to retail precincts in 2026 to broaden outreach.

Key concerns being raised included:

- Flocculant use in mining and the demonstration pit
- Shallow aquifer contamination and river health
- Rehabilitation outcomes
- Dust impacts on crops, pasture, and human health
- Impacts on tourism
- Loss of historical sites and infrastructure
- Mental health impacts associated with prolonged uncertainty

Areas of opportunity identified included:

- Local jobs and training pathways
- Apprenticeships
- Economic diversification
- Water and energy infrastructure
- Legacy projects
- Freight rail opportunities

Mick also summarised outcomes from recent agriculture and horticulture site visits undertaken with specialist consultants, noting both concerns and potential benefit-sharing opportunities. Concerns included biosecurity, market/EU accreditation, uncertainty about investment decisions and return on investment. Benefits included leasing opportunities, legacy infrastructure, and on-farm/off-farm income opportunities. Allison said that the ag/hort consultant will be returning late January / early February and GCM would be happy for names of local residents/farmers that would be interested in talking with the consultant, which could be with or without GCM staff.

## **Working Groups**

Ryan presented survey results of CRG members' interest in participating in more focused working groups as follows:

- CRG Sub-Groups Interest:
  - Community Engagement & Communications: CC, JN, TH, VR
  - Environmental & Technical: AC, AS, CC, JN, PR (Environmental &

Technical Studies); AS, JN, PR (Mine Design & Rehabilitation – including final land use, land care), AC, CC, JN, PR, RR (Water Supply, Management & Irrigator Interface).

- Benefit Sharing Working Group Interest:
  - Pillar 1 (Cultural Heritage Protection & First Nations Empowerment): CC, RR, TH
  - Pillar 2 (Local Workforce/Supply Capacity & Industry Partnerships): AC, GW, JN, RR, TH, VR
  - Pillar 3 (Investment in Local Infrastructure & Legacy Assets): AC, CC, JN, RR, TH, VR
  - Pillar 4 (Community Vibrancy & Liveability): CC, TH, VR

The initial proposal for each Working Group is:

- Made up of an 8 person panel comprising 3 CRG members, 4 community members and 1 Local Government or Statutory Authority Rep
- Non-remunerated
- Oversight by Mick Harrington (GCM); Indigenous Pillar via direct GLaWAC consultation
- Is advisory in nature – provides recommendations to GCM for consideration and implementation

Mick affirmed that CRG will have line of sight on the formation, workings, and outcomes of the working groups.

Next steps are to:

- Develop Pillar Project Plans containing Terms of Reference
- Call or Expressions of Interest via public advertisement



### **Proposed 2026 CRG Meeting Dates**

- Meeting #6 - Thursday 19 February
- Meeting #7 - Thursday 14 May
- Meeting #8 - Thursday 20 August
- Meeting #9 - Thursday 10 December

Ryan noted that while a baseline meeting frequency has been reduced, the CRG can call additional meetings if needed, and separate working groups will provide opportunity for CRG members to participate. He acknowledged that members' time is valuable and said the approach is to manage this carefully by progressing detailed work in parallel through working groups and reporting back to the CRG, ensuring meaningful engagement without overburdening participants.

All CRG members present agreed to this frequency.

### **Key Discussion Points:**

- RR recalled Mick's observations regarding mental health of landowners and asked what can be done about it proactively. Michelle highlighted a recent article on this matter quoting Dr Campbell, and Mick has committed to reaching out to Dr Campbell to gain his thoughts. LR stated that proactive mental health measures need to be put in place before the EES, citing personal challenges. DR suggested Gippsland Lakes Community Health may be a good provider of mental health advice and support given that they have a clinic and provide outreach. RR asked in the interests of transparency, could GCM look at providing details of mental health concerns shared by individuals or groups while protecting privacy, including information shared with the agriculture & horticulture consultant, and bring this information back to the CRG.
- Michelle provided detail on the VFF meeting including that it was focused on rehabilitation and examples of successful rehabilitation.
- Michelle stated that the Annual Summary of Quarterly Reports and the Community Engagement Plan, which provides a summary of the interests and concerns of each stakeholder group, can be found in the [Important Resources](#) section of the GCM website.
- John Mitchell recommended GCM makes a commitment to providing reports against baseline reports in open-book fashion every 6 or 12 months, which from experience creates traction with the community.
- TH highlighted that East Gippsland relies heavily on tourism and in areas like Kalgoorlie, they have information buildings for people to be informed about local mining and the impacts and benefits on the community. There may be an opportunity to build an information centre that people can visit.
- LR said you've also got to identify what individual's concerns are, referring to regular conversations with two local residents within 2km zone that feel stressed asking "what's it going to do to my lifestyle", being used to a quiet environment, having concern about dust entering water tanks and affecting health, and property values and salability. Many farmers and smaller landowners are close to retirement and their properties are tied to their superannuation. LR raised concerns about their mental health and the project's effect on their relationships. There are people who want to

paint their houses and fix up fences damaged in the 2014 fires. LR stated that these are the types of issues that need to be addressed at a personal/individual level for those who live in the immediate area. LR stated that people are very tired, angry, and starting to lose patience. Mick stated that he's happy to talk to individuals and LR commended that he/GCM gets a resolution within that community.

- LR stated that many in the local community in proximity to the mine are not computer literate or have internet.
- Michelle and Mick agreed that these conversations are not for public forums and require one-on-one interaction. Mick committed to meeting individuals at a place and time suitable to them. Michelle stated that GCM has doubled its engagement dedicated resources, is setting up a mobile office, has a Bairnsdale office, and GCM is prepared to meet residents in their home.
- Bryan clarified that the scope of the social impact assessment is about the project if it is approved and not intended to address social impact during the approvals process.
- GW expressed hope that the Mining & Rehabilitation Demonstration Pit may alleviate some of the unknown and concerns and asked how long it is active. Michelle replied that it will be 7 months and Stefan qualified that the earthworks would take 3 months. GW is hoping that the 7 month period will show evidence of impacts mitigation.
- LR asked to what extent does the demonstration pit indicate two mine voids a kilometer long and 40m deep, sharing feedback about concerns that small-scale trials and computer modelling do not adequately reflect the real-world impacts of full-scale mining, drawing on decades of local observation and past experiences where soil damage and landform instability only emerged years after disturbance, particularly in dispersive, sodium-affected soils under increased rainfall. Cautioning that rehabilitation may initially appear successful but could fail several years after approval, by which time impacts may be difficult or impossible to rectify. GW stated that you don't know what the weather patterns are going to be like year to year.
- Michelle stated that GCM is keen to take locals to active critical mineral mines in Victoria and WA to help people understand what it looks like and understand the process.
- Stefan emphasised that modelling and simulations are only one part of the assessment, and that the company retains responsibility for the land throughout the life of the mine and beyond. He highlighted that rehabilitation and landform stability must be achieved before relinquishment, backed by a substantial financial rehabilitation bond, ensuring the company remains accountable for outcomes even after mining ceases and backfilling is completed.
- Stefan explained that the design process explicitly accounts for extreme and low-probability events by incorporating probable maximum (water) flow rather than relying on average conditions. He noted that infrastructure, such as tailings cells, are engineered to withstand probable maximum events, including very rare and severe rainfall scenarios of 1.2m, well beyond historical norms. Stefan emphasised that these designs have been extensively tested, including under laboratory conditions, and that this conservative engineering approach gives the project team a high level of confidence in the expected performance and outcomes.

- John emphasised that we're past the 'trust me' and into the 'show me' phase of the project, encouraging GCM to take representatives of the CRG and other key local stakeholders on visits to other mine sites, as this was very successful in developing a factually-based shared understanding of the Fulham Prison proposal.
- RR asked if there had been any more thoughts on holding town hall meetings. Michelle said some of the commentary around the project is getting a little nasty and personal and still feels that if people have questions to ask, we can address those in a personal manner, and they can pop into the office. Michelle reaffirmed GCM's position that broader public forums are best held later in the project lifecycle once the data from studies is available, including from experts, to provide more meaningful responses to key concerns and questions. JS recommended that mental health support needs to be in place before such forums are run.
- TH reported on the BCCI-hosted Major Projects Summit held on 27 October aimed at informing local businesses about major procurement and economic opportunities associated with large infrastructure and energy projects, including Star of the South, Port of Edrom, and Gippsland Critical Minerals. The event successfully connected local businesses with project representatives, highlighted the scale of potential employment and economic growth, and generated follow-on interest, including a Commonwealth Bank proposal to sponsor a further business-focused event in Bairnsdale and inviting an economist to talk about the changes in local economies when large business come to town. Council representation was noted positively, and the overall outcome was described as positive and encouraging.
- GW attended the Major Projects Summit and observed that many small local businesses, particularly those employing staff, were strongly interested in the employment and economic opportunities discussed at the event. He noted that large projects can diversify and grow the regional economy beyond its traditional farming base, drawing a parallel with Sale's transformation following the Esso development, which left lasting infrastructure and a long-term legacy, an outcome he suggested could be replicated in East Gippsland.

### **Key Actions / Next Steps:**

- GCM to develop policies and strategies on how to proactively manage mental health and explore Gippsland Lakes Community Health's capabilities and offerings.
- GCM to pass along the findings of the agriculture and horticulture study, including mental health findings to the CRG.
- Mick to talk directly with local residents within 2km of the Project Area on an individual basis, focusing on lifestyle impacts, dust, water tanks, health, property values, and mental health.
- GCM to organise a local delegation comprising of members of the CRG to visit other mineral sands operations in 2026.
- GCM to provide details of BCCI's next forum in March once passed on by TH.

## 5. Questions & Answers

**Flocculants:** RR asked for an update on the selection and use of flocculants.

- Stefan explained that GCM will be using anionic polyacrylamide, which comes in a liquid or powder. The flocculant will be supplied as a powder, mixed and progressively diluted with water before being added to the tailings stream at a controlled dosage of around 50 grams per tonne of solids. Solids represent around 30% of the tailings, so that's a further dilution per volume. While some liquid, oil-based flocculants can be harmful at very high, undiluted concentrations, the powder product and dilution rates being used are hundreds of times lower and well within safe limits, so will not be toxic to aquatic life. The flocculant and dosage have already been selected through laboratory testing to achieve effective separation at the lowest possible dose, and the demonstration pit will apply this established approach rather than trialling or experimenting with different products. Stefan confirmed that dosage is mechanised, monitored and controlled. The use and performance of the flocculants is part of the groundwater impact assessment, which will be specific to the Fingerboards geology.
- Allison highlighted that Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) cover storage and handling, not the usage, dilution or dosage.
- RR requested an MSDS on the chosen flocculant and Stefan stated that it is available. Stefan stated that flocculant WaterShed 82258 – PB – EN MSDS, which was emailed to CRG members by Ryan Leslie on 29 Oct 2025, is the liquid version.
- RR suggested that GCM put details of the chosen flocculant and dosage rate on GCM's website and that the flocculant details/strategy should be presented to the CRG's Environmental & Technical Working Group.

**Water:** TC asked where GCM will be extracting water for the Demonstration Pit.

- Stefan stated that 10ML (which includes considerable contingency) of Mitchell River water will be extracted under an unconditional licence as part of GCM's existing licence.
- RR asked if GCM is aiming to purchase water from GLaWAC. Michelle confirmed that GCM has not had any conversations of this nature with GLaWAC and is needing to work through GLaWAC's processes in accordance with the Pathways to Partnerships framework before discussing anything of a commercial nature or discussion benefits, reinforcing that GCM is in very early-stage discussions with GLaWAC.

### Key Actions / Next Steps:

- GCM to provide CRG members with the MSDS for the powdered WaterShed flocculant.
- GCM to compile a step-by-step overview with published references of flocculant choice, usage and dosage rate and publish on GCM's website.
- GCM to share the flocculant strategy and groundwater impact study results with the CRG Environmental & Technical Working Group.
- GCM to circulate a diagram to the CRG outlining the difference between a full EES and an Environmental Report.

- GCM to circulate interests and concerns of each stakeholder group to CRG members. Note: Appendix A of GCM's [Community Engagement Plan](#), which can be found in the News & Resources section of the website, provides a high-level outline of the interests and concerns of each Stakeholder Group.
- GCM is to circulate Mick Harrington's details to CRG members as GCM's primary local point of contact – outlined below:
  - Mick Harrington
  - Email: [mharrington@gippslandcriticalminerals.com](mailto:mharrington@gippslandcriticalminerals.com)
  - Telephone: 0437 873 118

## **6. Meeting Close & Next Steps**

John Mitchell thanked members for the courtesy given to him and wished all members and their families a peaceful and joyous Christmas, and a safe and happy 2026.

The Next Meeting (Meeting #6) will be held on Thursday, 19 February 2026.

**Meeting concluded at:** 4:00 PM