

International Year of freshwater

2003

factsheet

Urban Water Use

Australians consume more than 24,000 gigalitres of water a year. More than 70% of this is used for irrigation, a further 21% going to urban and industrial uses and the rest used in additional rural activities.

There are growing pressures upon urban water supplies, boosted by increasing urban populations and the recurrence of droughts. All levels of Government, industry and households have an important role in conserving urban water resources. The Commonwealth Government recognises the benefits of a national approach to conserving Australia's urban water resources and has developed programs that aim to promote improvement in this area.

Water Efficiency Labelling Scheme

The Commonwealth Government recognises the growing need to reduce urban water consumption across Australia as populations increase and climate change results in more frequent extreme dry weather conditions. To approach this on a national scale the Commonwealth Government is assessing the feasibility of a Water Efficiency Labelling Scheme (WELS) that would involve the introduction of national mandatory water efficiency labelling and minimum performance standards for domestic water using devices.

The water-using products that could be covered by WELS include showerheads, washing machines, dishwashers, toilets and urinals. Part of the feasibility phase of WELS is an assessment of how such a scheme would address the issue of high domestic water consumption by providing nationally consistent water efficiency information to consumers at point of purchase and regulating manufacturers to stimulate design of more water efficient products.

The aim of WELS is to encourage the uptake of water efficient products and appliances in domestic and commercial areas while maintaining individual choice and accounting for regional variations in water supply in urban Australia.

Eco-Efficiency Agreements

Eco-Efficiency Agreements are new, innovative partnerships between Australian industry associations and the Commonwealth Government.

Eco-Efficiency Agreements are voluntary, three year agreements where industry associations work with The Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage to help their members improve business efficiency while reducing their impact on the environment.

In terms of water issues, Eco-Efficiency Agreements may include targets for reduction in water consumption, and discharge and emissions to water. These targets can be achieved through the implementation of eco-efficiency and cleaner production principles.

For example, WMC Limited (WMC), through using these principles, has progressively introduced process changes at its Olympic Dam mine site and processing plant in the arid north of South Australia to reduce its water consumption per unit of production, and is continuing to investigate further water conservation possibilities. Another company, Radiator Warehouse, after surveying available technology for recycling water and reducing chemicals, decided to develop its own much simpler system at a cost of only \$10,000. This was not only cheaper than available overseas technologies, but gives them ongoing savings of \$2,500 per year.

NABERS

The Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage is also working with the building industry on Australia's first comprehensive building environmental rating system, called the National Australian Building Environmental Rating System Project (NABERS).

NABERS will encompass a range of building types and rate such things as energy and water efficiency, site conservation and biodiversity, indoor air quality, efficiency of resource use and other relevant environmental factors.



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A building's rating for water use will be evaluated on such things as water consumption per person, primary water source (public supply, bore or tank), the use of waste water for landscaping and the use of sustainable sewerage systems.

Once finalised the system will provide information on the sustainability of our existing building stock and promote a shift in the way we see the built environment. This should lead to greater investment in sustainable building alternatives.

Greening of Government

The Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage recognises the need for Government to lead by example when it comes to greener operations. Commonwealth Government agency operations are largely office-based, but also include significant potential impacts to land, air, water and biodiversity. The Commonwealth Government is also a major purchaser of goods and services, and can therefore play a significant role in leading the development of procurement policies that take due consideration of environmental performance.

The focus of our greening of Government programme is to improve the environmental performance of Government operations. This means reducing volumes of waste sent to landfill, meeting or exceeding the energy efficiency targets of the Commonwealth Government's energy policy, fulfilling the requirements of the National Packaging Covenant, as well as reducing the amount of water used in Government operations. This can be achieved by conducting water audits to understand water usage, installing eco-efficient appliances, investigating opportunities for water re-use, incorporating water efficiency into contracts for building management and cleaning services, reducing lawn areas and increasing staff awareness of water consumption issues.

The Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage aims to achieve improvements in water quality and conservation by working with Australian Government, industry and households. The Department looks to partner with industry and others to encourage them to take a proactive approach to managing environmental risks and responsibilities that achieve 'win-win' environmental outcomes.



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