

Sewerage and Wastewater Discharge Management

The draft State Environment Protection Policy (Waters) sets standards for the management of sewerage systems and wastewater discharge to prevent pollution of surface waters and groundwater.



Sewerage system management

Sewerage management involves providing, managing and operating systems to convey, treat and dispose of sewage, and if a water corporation so decides, trade waste. Failure to contain sewage and trade waste in sewerage systems can cause significant environmental and public health harms.

Ideally, there should be no spills from sewerage systems, apart from those caused by exceptional circumstances, such as extreme wet weather events, or unforeseen system failures.

The State Environment Protection Policies (SEPP) for water have had an important role in defining expectations for the management of sewerage systems to protect the environment. These measures have driven significant investment by water corporations over the years to upgrade sewerage infrastructure to contain flows, reducing potential impacts on the environment.

Draft SEPP (Waters)

The draft SEPP (Waters) will continue to define expectations for how water corporations should manage sewerage infrastructure to protect the environment. This includes setting a minimum design standard for the containment of sewage to ensure spills only occur in exceptional events. The draft SEPP (Waters) recognises that there are systems across both metropolitan and regional areas which are not yet meeting this minimum design standard.

Some of these remaining systems are very expensive to upgrade, and have less obvious environmental benefit in comparison to those already upgraded. For this reason, the draft SEPP (Waters) introduces the concept of 'practicability' to recognise these challenges.

For actions or management practices to minimise risks to and impacts on beneficial uses so far as practicable, they must:

- reduce to the maximum extent practicable the impact of any activity or waste generated from an activity on the beneficial uses of water; and
- implement best practice where practicable; and
- include the pursuit of continuous improvement.

In assessing practicability, regard must be given to the:

- risks to existing and potential beneficial uses; and
- availability and suitability of actions or management practices, including best practice, to eliminate or reduce risks; and
- proportionality of actions or management practices.

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Processes to support Draft SEPP (Waters)

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) will work with water corporations to develop guidelines for sewerage management to support compliance with the provisions in draft SEPP (Waters).

These guidelines will assist in the assessment of practicability for the purposes of sewerage management.

Wastewater Discharge Management

Point source wastewater discharges can be a major contributor of poor water quality in sensitive inland and coastal areas. Unless adequately managed, toxicants, nutrients and sediments can be concentrated in point source discharges, leading to significant impacts on our waterways and bays.

Works approvals and licences issued by EPA set operating conditions for managing pollution and wastewater impacts. There are currently 15 different scheduled categories which are licensed by the EPA to discharge wastewater to surface waters.

For significant pollution sources, such as from sewage treatment plants, EPA licences typically set site-specific pollutant discharge limits. The draft SEPP (Waters) has a role in providing greater definition of rules and obligations in respect to these wastewater discharges. This includes details on the sort of information an applicant would need to provide to EPA, and details on how the EPA would approach assessing any application.

Draft SEPP (Waters)

Victoria has had SEPPs for water since the 1970s. These previous SEPPs have had an important role in

driving improvements in the quality of wastewater discharges and the protection of beneficial uses in water environments.

The rules and obligations in the previous water SEPPs have been revised in the draft SEPP (Waters) to ensure that the expectations and obligations on both applicants and the EPA are clear and concise.

In addition, the EPA has been moving towards a more risk-based model for compliance and enforcement. Increasingly, this has included EPA requiring applicants for works approvals and licences to undertake risk assessments as the means for setting risk-based licence limits.

Risk assessments are formal processes which evaluate the magnitude and probability of risks posed to beneficial uses. The risk assessment can assist the EPA in setting licence limits based on the condition of the receiving environment, rather than standards which may not be suitable for a discharge location.

The role of risk assessments in the assessment of wastewater discharge applicants has been made clearer in the draft SEPP (Waters).

Processes to support SEPP (Waters)

EPA has guidance documents developed over time to support applicants for licences that involve the discharge of wastewater to understand their obligations, and better manage their environmental risks.

To support the implementation of the proposed draft SEPP (Waters), EPA will progressively upgrade these documents to ensure they are consistent with the draft SEPP (Waters) and continue to reflect best practice environmental management.

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