

Protecting Water Quality for Recreation

The draft State Environment Protection Policy (Waters) provides contemporary standards for the protection of water based recreation in Victoria



Background

The draft SEPP (Waters) delivers greater clarity and certainty around how the water environment is to be protected. It provides for activities to be managed to minimise risks to the water environments and their key values.

Victorian communities expect that water quality across our state is suitable for sustaining flora and fauna, fishing, swimming, boating, industry and of course for high quality drinking water.

Beaches and rivers that are popular for recreational activities can receive inflows of pollutants, particularly after storm events. This can pose a serious risk to public health.

Pollution can increase the risk of illness for recreational users, making beaches and rivers unsuitable for water based recreation. Pollution can come from failing septic tanks, spills from sewerage systems, poor waste management, cross connections of sewer pipes with stormwater drains, and animal waste. It may also come from discharges from vessels in our waters.

In developing the draft State Environment Protection Policy (SEPP) (Waters), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) Victoria, Melbourne Water and Monash University conducted a review of the environmental quality objectives for the protection of water based recreation.

This review identified opportunities for the draft SEPP (Waters) to incorporate more up-to-date guidelines relevant to the protection of human health.

The objectives proposed in the draft SEPP (Waters) will assist water managers to better identify and manage threats to water quality, and help tailor long term management strategies to improve water quality and protect public health.

What do the updates mean?

The draft SEPP (Waters) includes updated environmental quality objectives for water based recreation which reflect current science and the relevant national guidelines used by many other states in Australia.

These objectives are more precautionary and better protect public health as they are based on scientific studies linking water quality with the risk of illness.

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The proposed objectives also assist waterway and catchment managers to better understand and respond to threats to water quality to protect and improve water quality in the long term.

EPA has programs in place to advise the public about the suitability of water for recreational activities at beaches in Port Phillip Bay and at sites along the Yarra River. The use of water quality forecasts and “swim advisories” helps the public make informed decisions about where and when to enjoy water-based activities. This includes advising the public not to swim after rainfall events, given the increased risk of illness associated with stormwater flows.

As the revised water quality objectives for recreational use are more protective of human health, it is likely there will be a small increase in the number of advisories not to swim at monitored beaches and waterways. The long-term objectives will also change the way beach water quality is reported annually and more beaches will be identified as needing long term management interventions.

This change generally reflects using a better standard, rather than an actual deterioration in water quality. This will be made clear in reporting of water quality to the public.

Processes to support SEPP (Waters)

The government has committed to a range of measures to improve the management of urban stormwater, to minimise the risk this poses to the environment and public health.

This includes additional scientific studies and measures outlined in the Port Phillip Bay Environmental Management Plan 2017-27, the Yarra River Action Plan, the Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy, Plan Melbourne 2017-50 and Water for Victoria.

In addition, EPA has committed to further local studies and monitoring to better understand the characteristics of Port Phillip Bay beaches to inform ongoing long-term management actions.

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