

CABINET

2023

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR
THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

Government Response - Assembly Resolution of 24 November 2022

Grass Clippings – Impact on ACT Waterways

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Resolution

On 24 November 2022, the Assembly passed the resolution 'Grass clippings – Impact on ACT Waterways'. The resolution calls on the ACT Government to:

- 1) Consider and explore options to improve the collection of grass clippings from its mowing program to protect ACT waterways. These options could include:
 - (i) trialling a dedicated street sweeping program in line with the most intensive mowing and leaf litter seasons;
 - (i) training for ACT Government mowing technicians; and
 - (ii) trialling a post-mowing program to collect grass clippings and other organic matter for proper composting.
- 2) Consult on the Urban Open Space Management Plan through YourSay, and publish the plan upon completion; and
- 3) Report back to the Assembly by the last sitting day in September 2023, in line with the commencement of the 2023-24 mowing program.

Background

The exceptional rainfall that the ACT has recorded for the past three consecutive years, associated with a particularly strong La Nina event, has presented land managers with a range of management challenges.

The demand on amenity mowing resources to respond to very high levels of grass growth is one such challenge that has required the land manager to rethink the operational model to meet the need for amenity mowing in trying circumstances.

A consequence of a particularly productive growing season is the volume of grass clippings produced over the mowing season.

Generally speaking, grass clippings are allowed to decompose in-situ returning valuable nutrients to the soil. However, as is often the case in an urban environment, clippings can spill onto hard surface areas such as footpaths, roads, medians, and drains, where they can be washed into waterways and ultimately into our city's lakes and ponds.

This statement summarises the strategies and operational responses employed by land managers in Transport Canberra and City Services (TCCS) to minimise the impact grass clippings can have on waterbodies as they break down and contribute to excessive nutrient loading.

Strategic Responses

The attached draft Urban Open Space Land Management Plan (LMP) recognises the potential impacts grass clippings can have on our waterways if not managed appropriately, and includes the following strategic objectives for managers to address:

- Explore options for improved coordination between our mowing program and the street sweeping program, noting that this can be challenging as wet weather conditions and growth rates can impact on the delivery of the mowing program.

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- More frequent use of air blowers to clear grass clippings back onto grassed areas. Staff safety is a primary consideration when undertaking this activity as it requires staff to work from the roadside.
- Staff training to ensure that proper procedures are followed.
- Review mowing practices to ensure that grass clippings are appropriately managed to prevent them from entering our waterways and contributing to poor water quality - consistent with the Canberra's Lakes and Ponds Land Management Plan and EPSDD's Healthy Waterways Program.

The measures described above are in addition to the following actions already identified in Canberra's Lakes and Ponds Land Management Plan:

- Cut vegetation to be removed from guttering before leaving site. No cut vegetation is to be swept or blown down a stormwater sump.
- Mowing will not occur within five metres of the high-water mark of a water body other than in specified (marked) access zones or recreation areas.
- Isabella Ponds Monash Grassland - Mowing upslope of the bike path at this site is to be one mower width or in line with the streetlights and the down slope side of the bike path should only be mowed one mower width to enable the creation of thicker grass which can filter runoff before it enters the pond.
- Lake Ginninderra Foreshore - mowing along the bike path to be one mower width either side of the path to protect significant vegetation and rare plants on the east side of path and to encourage thickening of the grass to filter runoff before it enters the lake.
- Lake Ginninderra Foreshore, Lake Tuggeranong District Park (south) grassland and Isabella Ponds Grassland - annual mowing operation plans to be referred to the Conservator of Flora and Fauna for advice.

Improvements to Operational Practices - Mowing Season 2023/24

The lessons learnt from the previous three very wet years have assisted with the identification of new initiatives planned for the 2023/24 mowing season which will likely result in a better outcome in restricting the movement of grass clippings into waterways. City Services plans to:

- Better synchronise with Roads ACT street sweeping activities, to wherever possible, follow after the completion of mowing runs;
- pursue an opportunity to secure two street sweeping machines, coming off lease from ACT Roads, **to dedicate** to post mowing collection of grass clippings (if the machines are able to be secured, it is unlikely machines will be operational prior to December 2023);
- double the use (from 3 to 6) of specialised large blow machines enabling more efficient removal of roadside mower clippings;
- replace 4 existing diesel mowers with electric machines which come complete with built in air-blower capacity on the front of the machine, allowing clippings to be cleaned from footpaths and other hard stand areas as mowing occurs;

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- contractual conditions will be strengthened to require 'cut vegetation must not be thrown onto the road surface, gutters, cycle paths or footpaths. The affected areas must be swept or blown clean after mowing by the contractor before leaving the site'.
- Mowing teams' *Principles of Mowing* yearly training has been updated with stronger material around the need to not 'place substances in a position where they can fall or be blown into a drain, gutter or local waterway including grass clippings'.
- Details of on-the-spot fines that can be applied have been also identified in the text, to demonstrate the possible consequences of poor clean up behaviour. The document then goes on to outline the simple steps that can be taken to avoid this situation.

Lakes and Ponds Maintenance Program

Both City Services and Roads ACT adopt practices to intercept nutrients at their source where possible, with the aim of removing them from the aquatic system as efficiently as possible, initiatives include:

- The removal of nutrients from waterways by harvesting aquatic vegetation such as floating ribbon weed at Yerrabi Pond and the native Azolla plants in various other ponds and wetlands;
- ACT Roads have numerous newly constructed GPT's (Gross Pollutant Traps) installed at Healthy Waterways sites (an EPSDD initiative to improve the functioning of wetlands) as well as hundreds of existing GPT's in stormwater systems. These GPT's intercept nutrient laden sediment by collecting it into forebays to be removed before it can migrate further downstream.
- GPT's are scheduled to be cleaned up to 6-8 times yearly removing large amounts of phosphorus and nitrogen laden sediment. As Place Management teams are in the area more regularly, staff are encouraged to inform their Roads colleagues if they require more regular cleanouts.
- Joining with EPSDD to deliver their "only rain down the stormwater drain" public education program – Stage 2 of which is currently being planned for delivery in the coming years.

Urban Open Space Land Management Plan (the LMP)

The LMP has undergone an extensive period of consultation, with the public invited to comment via the YourSay website from 24 May to 15 August 2023. A number of public interest groups and community councils have been provided interactive briefings on the plan.

The Directorate will produce a Listening Report detailing what was heard during the consultation period and how the LMP has been amended in response.

Existing Infrastructure

The public stormwater network managed by ACT Roads represents a \$4.6 billion investment in the management of stormwater.

The 4,000km of underground pipework, 280 gross pollutant traps, 216 retardation basins, and 16 water quality control ponds are designed to afford a high degree of water quality protection to downstream waterbodies.

Maintenance activities such as cleaning gross pollutant traps, desilting of sediment basins, desilting of ponds and open channels, planting and maintaining aquatic vegetation result in improved water quality.

22 large Gross Pollutant Traps (GPT) protect the lakes from debris, sediment, leaves, grass clippings and litter and an additional 9 large GPTs protect downstream waterways before stormwater enters the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo Rivers.

Conclusion

The very wet period we have just experienced has transformed the landscape of our city, bringing with it renewal and recovery. The need to balance the delivery of important business as usual services such as mowing and with protection of the environment is core business for land managers.

The strategies and operational practices described in this document will, taken together, provide us with a better way to ensure grass clippings entering our stormwater system are minimised and a potential source of nutrient loading in our waterways is effectively managed.