ACT Government

QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

Water Quality

Hot issues:

General

- Water quality is dependent on the condition of the catchments and levels of nutrient or other pollutants in those catchments.
- The Healthy Waterways Program and water governance reforms are key elements of the Government's strategy to improve the health of our lakes and waterways.
- $14 million was committed by the ACT Government in April 2022 to expand the Healthy Waterways initiative. This investment will deliver catchment planning and the construction of new water quality assets to target the sources of pollution entering our lakes and ponds.

Murrumbidgee River (bacterial contamination)

- The bacterial loads within the Murrumbidgee River are symptomatic of land and water management activities upstream of the ACT.
- The poor health of the Murrumbidgee River is a testament to the importance of cross-border collaboration on water management activities and the broader Murray-Darling Basin water reforms.
- The ACT Government remains engaged with the NSW and Australian governments to highlight the risk to human health and water security from upstream water and land management and identify solutions.

Key Information:

Lake and Waterways Closures

- As of 2 March 2023, sites closed for swimming (primary contact recreation) include:
  - Lake Ginninderra – Yerra Beach and Bargang Beach (bacteria alert)
  - Lake Tuggeranong – all recreation areas (blue-green algae – extreme alert level; bacteria alert)
  - Paddy's River – Murray Corner (bacteria alert)
- All swimming sites within Lake Burley Griffin are open for primary contact.
- Lake and river closure information can change rapidly. For up-to-date information on all waterways, we have an online reporting tool: https://www.cityservices.act.gov.au/news/water_quality_in_our_lakes_and_ponds
- The Environmental Protection Authority monitors lake water quality for blue-green algae.
- For information on Lake Burley Griffin, visit The Swim Guide website.

Cleared as complete and accurate:	03/03/2023	
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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Background:

Blue-green Algae

- Blue-green algae outbreaks occur due to a combination of high temperatures, high nutrient levels and calm weather conditions. These conditions commonly occur in several lakes across the ACT; in particular, in Lake Tuggeranong during the warmer months.
- Blue-green algae blooms are naturally occurring, but urban run-off contributes excessive nutrients to lakes which increases the frequency and duration of algal blooms.

Bacteria (intestinal Enterocci):

- Bacteria (Enterococci) are indicators of fecal material in the water and the possible presence of disease-causing bacteria, viruses and protozoa.
- Bacteria levels are known to become elevated after rainfall due to run-off from stormwater pipes, grazing land and upstream water bodies.
- The ACT Health Protection Service conducts weekly water testing for bacteria from September to April each year. Tests are performed weekly due to the increased likelihood of primary contact activities during warmer weather.
- City Services may display the 'Area Closed to Primary Contact' sign as a precaution if there has been significant rainfall since water samples were taken. However, bacteria levels may be high after rainfall even if the 'Area Closed to Primary Contact' sign is not displayed.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

Healthy Waterways (Basin Project)

Hot Issues

Belconnen Subsurface Wetland

- Representatives from the Healthy Waterways team have completed extensive consultation with the Belconnen community about the design of the subsurface wetland.
- Six community information sessions were held in Belconnen in October and December 2022 and most recently on 16 February 2023. Two presentations on the proposal were also given to the Belconnen Community Council in September and October 2022, and to the Ginninderra catchment Group in October.
- In general, the Belconnen community are supportive of the proposal but have expressed views for the design to include open water and street furniture.
- The Healthy Waterways team reviewed the design incorporating feedback from the community and external 'peer review' engineering consultants into the design.
- The Development Application for this proposal will be lodged once the design is completed.

General

- Through Stage 2 of the ACT Healthy Waterways program, the Government continues to invest in new stormwater infrastructure as a means to help improve the quality of stormwater entering Canberras creeks, lakes, and rivers.
- A Planning Phase report was completed earlier this year that includes designs, feasibility assessments and costings for 13 new water quality assets across the ACT.
- Assets with innovative designs were selected to expand the 'water sensitive urban design' options to help address the ACT's water quality.
- Assets that performed best (removed the most pollutant) among those explored within 6 subcatchments were:
    - A subsurface wetland in Belconnen Oval.
    - A floating wetland planned for Yerrabi Pond.
    - Four bioretention swales to replace existing grass swales draining the Kambah Playing Fields, where nutrients were detected as leaking into the adjacent stormwater channel.
    - The naturalisation of three creeks/drains in Calwell, Richardson, and Isabella Plains, which will both clean water and allow it to infiltrate into the groundwater.

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  - Three facilities to intercept, clean and re-use stormwater in Kambah (2) and Wanniassa. One of the three will be a reserve site (constructed if one of the priority projects is canelled).
  - A bioretention swale in Higgins, which has been redesigned as a small raingarden due to site constraints. This applies existing technology in relict green space in a manner that will need to be replicated around the catchment to help treat polluted stormwater.
  - Four small, 'pocket' raingardens were to be placed in green space within Fadden. Only two of the four will be progressed due to site constraints, but this will provide a useful proof of concept for at-source treatment of stormwater.
  - Thirty-eight drain outlets, linking small drains to adjacent green space, to help renaturalise our urban catchments.
  - A large raingarden in Kambah what has an associated bioswale. This is a reserve site.
- Two assets have been completed:
  - A set of four bioretention swales at Kambah Playing Fields have been built and are awaiting initial handover.
  - A pair of floating wetlands were deployed in Yerrabi Pond in February 2023.
- The program of up to 11 further water quality assets, including the Belconnen Wetland, is progressing through community consultation, design acceptance and development approval using funding from the $14 million budget injection in April 2022.
- The Belconnen wetland is planned to be completed by the end of the 2023/24 financial year, subject to timely approvals.
- Due to an increase in estimated construction costs, only 7 of the remaining ten assets can be built with current funds, and the scope of one of these may be curtailed.
- Additional funds to complete the remaining 3-4 projects has been sought in the most recent Expanding Healthy Waterways Catchment Plans business case.
- The Leaf Collective social channels and website are being maintained to keep them current and active in advance of another summer campaign targeting household management of leaf fall and grass clippings on suburban street verges.
- Griffith University has been procured to run the next Leaf Collective campaign, which marks the start of a rollout of the public education program across Canberra. This summer's campaign will be focused on specific (not yet selected) postcodes in the Lake Tuggeranong and Yerrabi Pond catchments. It is expected to run for 10 weeks from March 2023.
- A project restoring the rural/conservation catchment of the Naas/Gudgenby River has commenced. Contractors have been procured to conduct river restoration with local landowners and to draft a catchment plan for the area.

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- Research is continuing on several fronts:
    1. The University of Canberra is investigating the sources of nutrient pollution across urban areas of the Lake Tuggeranong catchment.
    2. NCEconomics and an ANU researcher are investigating social and economic values of Canberra urban lakes and the impacts of blue-green algal blooms.
    3. Smaller investigations into:
        - Evaluating the effectiveness of the Leaf Collective
        - The source of faecal contamination in ACT waterways
        - How to design constructed wetlands as good habitat for re-introduction of the Green and Gold Bell Frog.
        - Good practices in stormwater maintenance.
        - The applicability of landcare guidelines for water sensitive drainage lines, developed for Melbourne, to Canberra's urban environments.
        - Upgrading the ACT's water sensitive urban design technical standards.
        - Quantifying subcatchment inflows to Lake Tuggeranong
- The asset performance and waterways water quality monitoring contract has gone to market.
- Healthy Waterways is supporting the Nature in the City grant program as a way to create more water sensitive green space.

Background

- ACT Healthy Waterways aims to reduce sediment and nutrient pollution of ACT lakes and waterways, and the problems that the pollution causes like algal blooms.
- Stage 1 of ACT Healthy Waterways began in 2014 as a $94 million joint initiative of the Australian and ACT Governments. It was completed in June 2021. Stage 1:
    - Designed and built 19 large water quality assets—raingardens, ponds, wetlands, and channel restorations—according to water sensitive urban design principles.
    - Carried out a major riparian restoration.
    - Conducted a public education/behavioral change program, known as *H2OK: Keeping our Waterways Healthy.*
    - Performed research into pollution, blue-green algal blooms, and control methods.
- The ACT Government invested a further $1 million to build a floating wetland in Lake Tuggeranong, to begin planning for the next stage of works, and to extend the research program.
- Since February 2021, a total of $20 million has been invested in 3 tranches of the PaGA commitment to *Expand Healthy Waterways: $30 million over 4 years*.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

Queanbeyan Sewage Treatment Plant

Talking points:

- The Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council (QPRC) has proposed the construction of a new sewage treatment plant near Oaks Estate, to serve future population needs and address ageing infrastructure.
- The proposal is nearing the end of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process. Once the Planning and Land Authority is satisfied that enough information has been provided, an EIS Assessment Report briefing package will be provided to Minister for Planning and Land Management.
- The Conservator of Flora and Fauna has commented on information about the downstream impacts to aquatic ecosystems and water quality throughout the assessment process.
- The ACT Environment Protection Authority is in discussion with QPRC to review the licence conditions for the Queanbeyan Sewage Treatment Plant (QSTP). These conditions set limits on operational arrangements to minimise water quality impacts.

Key Information

- The existing QSTP is estimated to have a design capacity for 34,500 Equivalent Persons (EP) but currently services about 52,000 EP.
- The plant is meeting the existing effluent licence conditions, however, to protect the lake's values would require more stringent discharge conditions that are unlikely to be met by the current infrastructure. The existing plant is also unlikely to continue meeting the existing licence conditions under the projected population growth in Queanbeyan.
- The 2022 *State of the Lakes and Waterways in the ACT* report by the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment recommends review of the Environmental Authorisation (licence to pollute) held by QPRC, to ensure the proposed new treatment process results in water discharge quality that matches best practice for a modern urban sewage treatment plant.
- A 2012 report by the OCSE estimated that continued deterioration in the quality and reliability of Lake Burley Griffin as a sporting venue creates an economic cost to the ACT and region of around $25 million per annum.
- Water quality within Lake Burley Griffin results in regular closures for primary human contact due to blue-green algae and bacterial levels that exceed human health guidelines.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Background Information

Environmental Impact Assessment

- Section 123 of the *Planning and Development Act 2007* identifies assessment of the proposal as Impact Track requiring an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Specifically, the proposal includes activities identified in Schedule 4 of the Act which triggers an EIS: "*construction of a sewage treatment plant that will be less than one kilometre from the boundary of a residential block and will be able to treat each day more than 2,500 equivalent persons".*
- The Impact Track is the most vigorous environmental assessment process in the ACT.
- Concerns raised by the Conservator on the EIS in March 2021, April 2022 and October 2022 included downstream impacts to aquatic biodiversity and water quality, noting the socio-economic and cultural significance of Lake Burley Griffin.
- If the Minister for Planning and Land Management is satisfied the EIS provides an acceptable level of information to describe environmental impacts of the development, this will allow the QPRC to apply for development application for the proposed QSTP upgrades.
- The DA process will determine whether the impacts have been minimised appropriately.

Background on development

- The existing QSTP was built in the mid-1930s and is located within the Jerrabomberra district of the ACT. The plant processes sewage from NSW and Oaks Estate (in the ACT) and discharges treated effluent into the Molonglo River.
- A study commissioned in 2011 recommended a major upgrade to the plant, but those upgrades were not carried out. Since 2011, the condition of the QSTP has continued to deteriorate while the local population has increased. This has resulted in exceedance of the design capacity of the plant.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

Murray Darling Basin Water Reforms within the ACT

Talking points:

- The Murray-Darling Basin water reforms provide the appropriate scale of management, across State and Territory borders, to respond to our climate emergency and safeguard the long-term security of our water resources.
- The Australian Government is providing approximately $2.6 million to support the implementation of Murray-Darling Basin water reforms within the ACT during 2021-2024.
- The ACT is working with the Commonwealth to meet its water recovery commitment through a program of water efficiency measures. These measures are important for building a water secure city.

ACT's water recovery commitment (4.9 GL Shared Reduction Amount):

- The ACT water recovery target was met in 2014 through a purchase made by the Australian Government of water entitlement held by ACTEW. The purchase occurred in the regulated Murrumbidgee water management area where it could have most utility for the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder.
- The Australian Government subsequently received internal advice that deemed the water recovery as ineligible under the Basin Plan.
- The ACT is working with the Australian Government to finalise its water recovery commitment by June 2024.

ACT's position within the MDB Ministerial Council meeting (Feb. 2023)

- Ministers reaffirmed their determination to deliver the Basin Plan in full and discussed options to progress delivery.
- At the meeting we continued to express our support for delivering the environmental outcomes of the Basin Plan and to progress First Nations access to water entitlements.
- Other Basin governments requested an extension of time to deliver their commitments. This will be the subject to discussion at the next Council meeting in mid-2023.
    - The ACT is not seeking to extend the timeframe to meet our water recovery commitment.

Key Information

- Priorities for water management reform within the ACT over the 2021-24 period include:
    - contemporising water governance arrangements to support integrated policy and program delivery
    - advancing the water interests of Ngunnawal Traditional Custodians

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- renewing the ACT's policy for 'Non-urban water metering' to ensure that the metering standards promote sustainable water use.
- climate vulnerability and water security planning to build resilience in the environment and community of the ACT and surrounding region
- facilitating improved community engagement on the Basin Plan implementation and review within the upper Murrumbidgee region
- delivering water for the environment by returning at least 4.9 gigalitres to the basin through a suite of water efficiency measures.

Background Information

- The Basin Plan was established in 2012 under the *Water Act 2007* (Cwlth).
- Programs developed to implement the Basin Plan are scheduled to conclude by 2024. This includes measures under the Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism.
- The Murray-Darling Basin Authority is required to conduct an evaluation of the Basin Plan implementation by 2024 and a review of the Basin Plan by 2026.

<u>ACT Shared Reduction Amount</u>

- The Basin Plan commits the ACT to 4.9 GL of water recovery for achieving shared environmental outcomes within the southern connected basin.
- In October 2014, the Australian Government confirmed the purchase settlement of 9.383 GL General Security Murrumbidgee water entitlement from ACTEW.
- In May 2017 the Australian Government raised concerns on how to legally recognise the ACT's shared reduction amount (4.9 GL) from its sustainable diversion limit with water purchased in the regulated Murrumbidgee resource area (in NSW downstream of Burrinjuck Dam). At this time the Murray-Darling Basin Authority indicated that this could be resolved through a Basin Plan amendment.
- In Feb 2019, the Australian Government advised that the water purchase within the regulated Murrumbidgee could not contribute to the ACT's water recovery commitment, and that water recovery would be required from within the ACT water resource area.
- Legal advice from the ACT Government Solicitor (2019) supported the Australian Government's position that the ACT's shared reduction amount must be sourced from within the ACT water resource area.

QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

2021 Catchment Health Indicator Program (CHIP) Report

Talking Points

- A key part of the Waterwatch program is the annual Catchment Health Indicator Program report – known affectionately to most at the CHIP report. This provides a "catchment health score" of river reaches in the Upper Murrumbidgee, displayed in individual report cards, using data collected by Waterwatch volunteers.
- The purpose of the CHIP report is to give the community a better understanding of water quality and waterway health issues in the catchment as well as providing a baseline assessment of catchment health to assist natural resource managers and policy-makers.
- The 2021 CHIP report results are impressive:
    - 96 report cards on various river and wetland reaches across the ACT region;
    - 1,779 water quality surveys, 181 waterbug surveys and 219 riverbank condition assessments; and
    - All collected at 229 sites by over 200 Waterwatch volunteers.
- The results show that:
    - 7 report cards received an Excellent (A);
    - 42 got a Good (B) result;
    - 45 scored a Fair (C); and
    - 2 received a Poor (D) result.
- The news has been overwhelmingly positive for the upper Murrumbidgee catchment with 44 of the 96 report cards showing improvement, 34 remaining steady and only 18 showing a decline. It is heartening to see catchments directly and indirectly impacted by the fires, such as Hospital and Bogong creeks in Namadgi National Park all bounce back this year. Some even receiving Excellent report cards.
- I thank the Waterwatch volunteers for their valuable contribution. The 2022 CHIP report will be available in the coming months.

Background Information

- Upper Murrumbidgee Waterwatch supports the community in the monitoring and caring of our local waterways. The program has been running for over 25 years and has sites right at the top of the Murrumbidgee River in Kosciusko National Park, all the way down to Taemas Bridge where the Murrumbidgee enters Burrinjuck Dam near Yass.
- Two primary functions of the Waterwatch program are to facilitate community engagement through the monitoring and care of local waterways, and to use the data

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(water quality, waterbugs and riverbank condition assessments) as an early warning system for aquatic ecosystem health issues.

- There are now over 28,000 Waterwatch water quality surveys on the Atlas of Living Australia database dating back to 1995.
- Waterwatch works in partnership with the three community catchment groups (Molonglo, Southern ACT and Ginninderra) to implement the Waterwatch program. The ACT Government has provided funding through to June 2023 for the coordinator positions which are essential for training and supporting the volunteers.
- An additional coordinator is funded through Icon Water to support volunteers to monitor waterways in the Cooma Monaro region, upstream of the ACT. This allows Waterwatch to work with regional partners and collect water quality data on a truly catchment scale.
- The 2022 CHIP report is currently being written and will be released on World Water Day, 22 March 2023.

QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

Establishing A Holistic And Coordinated Approach To Water Management In The ACT - Office Of Water

Talking points:

- The Office of Water has been established to provide a holistic and coordinated approach to water policy, planning and program delivery.
- Activities to strengthen water governance arrangements are underway, for example:
    - Recruitment continues towards a target staffing profile of 16 (currently 15 staff employed). This excludes 7 staff employed under the Healthy Waterways program.
    - The water resource policy and planning responsibilities have been delegated from the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) to the new Office under a Notifiable Instrument (NI2022-607).
    - A new Cross-Directorate Advisory Committee is in the process of being formed to strengthen coordination of water management responsibilities across agencies. The first meeting of this Committee will be convened by mid-2023.
    - The Office of Water is working with the Ngunnawal Traditional Custodians to develop a strategy to advance their interests in water management and ownership. This is supported by a new program of aboriginal waterway assessments that commenced in mid-2022.
    - Project work is underway to support water security planning, refresh of the ACT Water Strategy and scoping the Water Information Hub. These are exciting new initiatives that the Canberra community will have the opportunity to engage on throughout 2023.

Key Information

- The 2022-23 Budget commits to $1.58 million of additional funding across the next two years to establish the Office, implement reforms to strengthen management arrangements and deliver new initiatives.
- The Office of Water will develop new initiatives that aim to:
    - improve public access to water information
    - advance the water interests of the Ngunnawal community
    - provide a long-term plan for securing Canberra's water supply.
- The Office of Water has been formed within the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD), Environment, Heritage and Water Division.
- Amendments to the *Water Resources Act 2007* (ACT) are being drafted and scheduled to be introduced to the Assembly by mid-2023. The amendments aim to clarify roles and responsibilities for water policy and planning.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Background Information

- The Parliamentary and Governing Agreement for the 10th Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly includes the commitment to *consider the best administrative arrangements to manage new water programs and provide a holistic and coordinated approach to water programs and policy*.
- Establishing the Office of Water was informed following a review of current governance arrangements conducted by the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate under the Governance Review Project.
- The core aim of the Office of Water is to help the sector better:
    - clarify (or reset) the vision, objectives and goals for the sector;
    - tackle discrete and more immediate issues and governance reforms such as roles, responsibilities and accountabilities;
    - coordinate on cross-cutting issues, foster collaboration and help reach decisions that reflect a more coordinated, integrated approach;
    - investigate and resolve deeper issues of governance and structure; and
    - communicate with the public on ACT water resource management issues.
- The Office has responsibility to:
    - lead policy and planning for the ACT water sector, including regulatory setting (e.g. setting environmental authorisations for water quality issues);
    - implement the full package of governance reforms in consultation with relevant agencies;
    - undertake monitoring and reporting to government on the implementation of governance reform priorities, water plans, policies and strategies;
    - provide the primary point of engagement with the ACT community on water sector issues; and
    - undertake assurance reviews in line with an annual assurance work program agreed by the Minister for Water.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

Non-Potable Water Pricing Review

Talking points:

- Current water pricing policy gives golf clubs a 50% discount through the Market Equity Scheme on the non-potable Water Abstraction Charge.
- The government consulted ACT Golf Clubs in October/November 2022 in response to the pricing review. This gave clubs the opportunity to provide feedback about individual irrigation requirements and water security, current pricing policy and potential policy options in response to the Non-potable Water Review.
- The government acknowledges that the timeframe to reach a final position to respond to the Non-potable Water Review has been protracted and that golf clubs are seeking price certainty for forward planning.
- I recognise that water pricing is a complex issue and the circumstances of each licensee are unique. Many potential policy options have been assessed to try to achieve a balanced outcome that is fair and equitable for all licensees, not just golf clubs.
- Additional feedback will be sought from broader consultation with licensees and stakeholders, to finalise a government Response to the Review in 2023.

<u>Magpies Golf Club:</u>

- The situation with Belconnen Magpies Golf Club is unique. The Magpies Club is established in an area that has limited access to cheaper sources of water. The club is reliant on treated wastewater that includes costs for treatment and pumping.
- Treated water provided to Magpies by Icon Water is under a confidential and commercial contract. The government has no influence in relation to this contract but notes the ICRC has reviewed the price of water supplied under this contract.
- Costs for the operation of clubs need to be shared across those in its membership that directly benefit from the service. Passing on operating costs through increased membership fees is a business decision of sporting clubs.

Key Information

- The Review and any proposed changes to water pricing is restricted to non-potable water use only and will not affect potable water charges.
- Proposed policy is intended to support a nuanced approach to the application of charges for water consumption that seeks to balance the trade-off between affordability and promoting water conservation.
- The Review recommends the financial support for clubs under exceptional circumstances. The nature of this financial assistance is being considered as part of a package of policy measures in development.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Background Information

Non-potable Water Review

- The ACT Government committed through the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement to ensure that clubs continue to support the community while reducing harm from gaming.
- A review into water costs for high-intensity club users of non-potable water commenced on 1 March 2021 by ACT Treasury. The aim of the review was to consider the impact of water costs on the operation of clubs while not requiring cross-subsidisation by other ACT water users.
- The Review was finalised and published on the *Your Say* website in December 2021.
- The scope of the review was limited to non-potable water only. This includes water sourced from rivers, dams and groundwater sources, recycled water from sewage treatment plants and stormwater from the Inner North Reticulation Network. Treated drinking water (potable water) was not part of the Review.

National water reforms

- Micro economic reforms related to water pricing have been agreed by successive governments under the National Competition Policy, National Water Initiative (NWI, 2004), Water Act Cth (2007) and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (2012).
- The ACT is a signatory to inter-governmental agreements that give effect to these water reforms. Specifically, the ACT has agreed to implement water pricing and institutional arrangements that promote economically efficient and sustainable use of water resources, water infrastructure assets, and government resources devoted to the management of water.
- The NWI pricing principles state that recycled water and stormwater should be consistent with pricing policies for potable water, and stimulate efficient water use.
- The pricing principles promotes user-pays and pricing transparency, in respect of water supply systems and cost recovery for water planning and management activities.

ACT Water Strategy 2014-44 Striking the Balance

- The ACT Water Strategy aims to achieve 'an integrated and efficient water supply system that provides for the optimal mix of supply options, encourages efficient use of water, is resilient to climate variability, and secures the social, economic and environmental needs of the ACT community'.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Environment; Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

Portfolio: Environment

Fisheries Conservation and Management

Talking points:

- Canberra has a thriving recreational fishing community. One in five Canberrans engage in recreational fishing, which is known to have significant positive health and wellbeing outcomes.
- To reduce fishing pressure on the natural environment, provide a local recreational fisheries resource and provide a biodiversity benefit to the urban lakes, the ACT Government stocks fish into several Canberra lakes and ponds to the value of $25,000 annually.
- Pest fish are present in almost all urban ponds, often through illegal transfer by the public. Species introduced include Carp, Gambusia, Redfin Perch, and Goldfish.
- Carp present a significant problem in the ACT, being the most common and highest biomass pest fish. Carp cause reduced water quality, compete with native fish for habitat and resources, and have recently been detected in Googong water supply reservoir.
- A biocontrol agent, Carp Herpes Virus, has the potential to reduce (but not eradicate) Carp populations. Research by the Australian Government is ongoing (with input from ACT ecologists), and a decision at a national level has not yet been made about whether to pursue release of the virus.
- Physical control of Carp by direct removal is not considered viable as a general control method as they are prolific breeders, are very widespread, and there is a high likelihood of illegal re-introduction by members of the public.
- Biosecurity control measures are in place to combat spread of the Epizootic Haematopoietic Necrosis Virus (EHNV), which is lethal to many species of fish.
- The pest fish, Redfin Perch, is a known carrier of the disease. Biosecurity control measures are in place for the sensitive Cotter River catchment, where endangered and EHNV-sensitive Macquarie Perch live, to reduce the likelihood of the disease or Redfin Perch entering the river.
- The ACT Government is working with the Buddhist community to increase understanding about how to perform “life releases” of fish into waterways ethically and in a way that avoids risk to the environment from introduction of pest fish or disease, and prevents death to the animals released.

Key Information

- The *ACT Fisheries Act 2000* provides for the maintenance of fish stocks for recreational fishing, the protection of native species, and the activity of ethical

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angling, in addition to regulating fish trade and the keeping of fish. It covers aquatic invertebrates (such as crayfish), as well as fish.

- Eight out of 13 native aquatic species in the ACT are listed as protected or threatened at territory or national level.
- Major threats to these species include water extraction and flow modification, barriers to movement (e.g. roads, dams), poor water quality, pest species and disease, over-fishing, loss/modification of habitat, and climate change.
- Fish habitat is severely compromised in some natural waterbodies. For example, the Murrumbidgee River adjacent to Tharwa is affected by large amounts of deposited sand sourced primarily from historic catchment damage. Engineered structures have already been trialled in this section of river and found to be highly effective in improving habitat and consequently native species composition.
- Connectivity for aquatic animals is frequently disrupted by road crossings and large infrastructure (e.g. dams). Barriers that are a problem to aquatic animals have been mapped and assessed for priority of needing intervention by ACT Government aquatic ecologists.
- Fish stocking in the ACT is guided by the ACT Fish Stocking Plan, currently being updated for the period 2022 to 2027. A community consultation listening report is available on the ACT Government website. A separate Ngunnawal consultation process is also taking place.
- Release of the the Carp Herpes Virus raises certain risks. If the virus is released and causes significant fish death there will be a major impact to the amenity of Canberra urban lakes and an associated clean-up cost, and possible water quality impacts.

Background Information

- Conservation Research branch aquatic ecologists monitor the condition of threatened species in the ACT, stock and monitor the urban lakes, and carry out or advise on policy and management actions. Action Plans for threatened fish species are due to be reported on in 2023.
- The issue of illegal fishing activities observed by anglers is frequently raised on social media. Enforcement actions are investigated by the Parks and Conservation Service Licencing and Compliance section and Parks and Conservation Service rangers if in a rural area. There are no dedicated fisheries enforcement officers in the ACT Government.
- Fish kills rarely, but do occasionally occur in the ACT due to e.g. poor water quality, weather, and disease outbreaks. In the event of a fish kill, an investigation will take place between Environment Division aquatic ecologists and the ACT Environment Protection Authority to determine cause and management, followed by clean-up usually managed by the land manager.

- Canberra is a known hotspot for EHNV. This disease primarily affects the introduced pest fish Redfin Perch and is also known to affect native species such as threatened Macquarie Perch. The disease is notifiable at the international level.
- The ACT Buddhist community are sometimes involved in a practice known as “life release” where animals are released from captivity, servitude, or death into the wild. If this practice is done inappropriately it can result in the release of new pests, diseases or the death of the animals being released.

QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

Water Information Reporting - Office of Water

Talking points:

- The historic ACT Water Report out-grew its original purpose with information contained within the Report duplicated in other forms and on websites.
    - A succinct Report Card on implementation of the ACT Water Strategy is produced annually and published on the EPSDD website.
- The Office is working with relevant agencies to scope a contemporary web-based platform to provide improved public access to water information.
- A review of monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the outcomes of the ACT Water Strategy will be conducted by the Office during 2023, to ensure that the information being reported is meaningful for the outcomes and the audience.
- The activities of the new Office of Water are planned to be delivered by June 2024, to align with its scheduled review.

Key Information

- The recent State of the Lakes and Waterways report (OCSE 2022) recommends establishing a single point of truth for water quality in the ACT on a public online platform.
- Question on Notice 888 requested a response on why the annual ACT Water Report has not been published since 2015.
- There are no statutory requirements under ACT or Commonwealth legislation to produce the annual "ACT Water Report".

Background Information

- Information on water quality monitoring within the ACT is publicly reported in:
    - The Catchment Health Indicator Program Annual Report,
    - City Services website for water quality in lakes and ponds, and
    - National Capital Authority website for Lake Burley Griffin.
- The Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) reports on its obligations under the *Water Resources Act and Environmental Protection Act* in the Annual Report of the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate.
- *The Water Resources Act* (Part 8, Assessment of water resources) requires the EPA (delegated to the EPSDD) to ensure that a continuous program for the assessment of the water resources is carried out. There is no reporting obligation.

Cleared as complete and accurate:	03/03/2023	
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- Reporting obligations for water information to the Australian Government includes:

  Water Act 2007

  - Annual reporting by Basin governments (s71) on water use and Sustainable Diversion Limit compliance. This information is requested in a format specified by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA).
  - Information on water resource volumes as requested annually by the Bureau of Meteorology for the National Water Accounts (Part 7). This information is requested in a specified format.

  Murray-Darling Basin Agreement – Basin salinity management

  - Annual reporting on meeting end-of-valley salinity targets (Schedule B, cl29). This information is requested in a format specified by the MDBA.

  Basin Plan 2012

  - Annual reporting on the effectiveness and compliance with the Basin Plan. The reporting requirements are set out in Schedule 12 and the reported information is requested in a format specified by the MDBA.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Portfolio: Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

Water Efficiency Projects - MBD Plan

Talking points:

- The Murray-Darling Basin Plan is a complex instrument made even more complex by the policy and legislated conditions placed on its program funding; that is the Water for the Environment Special Account.
- The focus for the previous Australian Government has been on efficiency measures delivered by the irrigation, industry and mining sectors.
- The Australian Government has recently announced a policy shift in its appetite for a broader suite of activities to achieve the water recovery targets, that better aligns with our project design.
- ACT and Australian Government officials are in discussion on the best approach to deliver water savings through a program of work that supports our long-term water security.
- We will be finalising our water recovery commitment before legislated deadline of June 2024. This will require agreement on the funding arrangements and scope of water efficiency measures within the 2023 calendar year.

Key Information

- The ACT urban water efficiency project (business case) proposes to deliver water savings through:
    - irrigation infrastructure upgrades for parks and sporting ovals
    - further integration of water sensitive urban design into urban developments to reduce water mains use, e.g. increased rainwater harvesting, appliances with higher water efficiency rating, and
    - water demand management, e.g. education program, residential and industrial retrofits.
- The business case also refers to waterway improvement activities similar to the current Healthy Waterways program.
- The above-mentioned projects were assessed on their potable water savings capacity, cost effectiveness and implementation risk.

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QUESTION TIME BRIEF

Background Information

- At the Murray–Darling Basin Ministerial Council (MinCo) meeting of 8 June 2018, the ACT Government agreed to investigate options to deliver a proposed urban water initiative integrating water security and waterway improvement activities in the ACT.
- The investigations were funded by the Australian Government to address the ACT's water recovery commitment (4.9 GL shared reduction amount) but with the potential to deliver up to 15 GL of water for the environment.
- The funding guidelines for the Off-farm Water efficiency Program were announced by the Australian Government in 2021. The guidelines were designed for participants from the irrigation, industry and mining sectors. The ACT required bespoke arrangements to deliver urban efficiency projects.
- The Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate met with the Department representatives from the Australian Government on 2 March 2023 to discuss the ACT's Business Case for urban water efficiency measures. The Department presented an alternative funding approach within the context of the Australian Government's Water Recovery Strategy; released in February 2023. This approach provides a simplified funding model that will still support urban water efficiency measures. Separate briefing will be provided on this matter.

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