

2026

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

ELEVENTH ASSEMBLY

**Water quality – Lakes and Waterways – Improvement – Assembly Resolution of 28
October 2025 – Government Response**

**Presented by
Suzanne Orr MLA
Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water
May 2026**

In response to the Assembly resolution from 28 October 2025 on improving water quality in our lakes and waterways, the government welcomes the Assembly's focus on waterway health, which multiple community surveys suggest is an important matter for Canberra residents.

The ACT's lakes, ponds and other waterways and surrounding green corridors and parks are integral to the design of Canberra.

Blue-green areas provide residents with considerable amenity and opportunities for recreation, exercise, social connection and urban travel.

They are vital for our resilience to climate change, reducing the temperatures of our suburbs and thus mitigating the health hazard that extreme heat poses to our community.

Blue-green spaces hold special value for the ACT's Traditional Custodians, enabling their connection to Country.

And they are critical to the survival of our local plants and animals, providing habitat, shelter and corridors for movement between refuges.

The government is very much aware of the benefits provided by healthy lakes and waterways, and we recognise the risks posed by poor water quality as outlined in the Assembly resolution.

We are not alone in facing water quality problems in our lakes, creeks and rivers: towns and cities elsewhere in Australia and around the world are grappling with this very issue.

Research funded by our government has shown that stormwater draining from Canberra's suburbs is polluted with excess plant nutrients that can stimulate algal growth and lead to blooms of harmful algae in our lakes, forcing the government to close them to public access.

We also need to periodically close the lakes and rivers due to high levels of faecal matter, mainly following storms, though how much of this is from potential sewage leaks rather than from wildlife or stock is the subject of current research.

Over the past decade, the government has made substantial strategic investments in improving water quality across Canberra, with a focus on reducing sediment and nutrient pollution.

The government invested \$94 million—\$85 million in Commonwealth funding and a \$9 million ACT Government investment— to establish the ACT Healthy Waterways program. This first stage of Healthy Waterways is best remembered for building 20 wetlands and other water quality assets across Canberra. We ran an extensive planning process to ensure that these were the best-performing assets that we could build to improve water quality. The seven assets we built in the Lake Tuggeranong catchment at this time are now intercepting around 13% of the stormwater pollution destined for the lake.

We also used the Stage 1 Healthy Waterways investment to fund research into what's causing harmful algal blooms in Lake Tuggeranong, which is the lake experiencing the most closures. We discovered surprisingly high levels of algal nutrients in stormwater across the Tuggeranong catchment. On average, the volume of nutrients entering Lake Tuggeranong via stormwater each year significantly exceeds the amount required to initiate an algal bloom. This

finding shifted our attention away from in-lake interventions, such as installing bubblers in the lake or other methods to manage the internal supply of nutrients from lake sediments, toward reducing the amount of nutrient pollution that is entering the lake.

While this was good progress, it was clear to us, based on ongoing lake closures, that we could do more to improve water quality in Canberra's waterways. As a result, the ACT government extended the Healthy Waterways program by investing more than \$30 million to continue to build assets that improve stormwater quality as well as to develop catchment plans that provide a strategic, evidence-based roadmap to achieve good water quality in our urban lakes.

The focus of assets built in this second stage of Healthy Waterways was to trial promising innovations, including:

- drain outlets and bioretention swales that reduce stormwater pollution at its source,
- a subsurface wetland to target dissolved plant nutrients,
- floating wetlands to directly compete with harmful algae,
- recycling stormwater for irrigating sports fields; and
- the partial re-naturalisation of a major cement stormwater drain in Calwell.

Our ongoing investigations—research, water quality monitoring and modelling, and data analyses—are focussed on setting targets to reduce nutrient pollution, and on evaluating the costs and benefits of different options. This work will culminate in the development of catchment plans for managing water quality.

Late last year the government released for public comment an options report for restoring Lake Tuggeranong to good health along with three technical documents with the evidence base underpinning the options.

The government is now considering the feedback from the public and the first catchment plan, which will serve as a basis for investment to restore the health of Lake Tuggeranong.

There are three main elements to our strategy for Lake Tuggeranong. The first is preventing stormwater from becoming polluted with plant nutrients in the first place. For example, the government, businesses and all Canberrans need to adopt the same attitude to fallen leaves and grass clippings as they do to paper and plastic litter: either bin it or recycle it (in other words, for leaves and grass, this means composting them). We must not allow leaves and grass to end up in our drains, since the nutrients they contain leach out after the first rain, and this is a major source of nutrient pollution entering our lakes. This is why our street sweeping program and efforts by residents to manage leaves and grass on their properties and road verges are vital to improving water quality.

The second strategy is to build, operate and maintain wetlands and other water assets to filter pollutants from stormwater. And the third is to remove nutrients from lake waters and to find environmentally friendly anti-algal agents to suppress harmful algal growth when blooms do arise.

The government has also undertaken similar investigations into the sources of pollution driving poor water quality and algal blooms in the Lake Burley Griffin and Lake Ginninderra catchments, including Yerrabi Pond. The evidence base developed will underpin the development of future plans for tackling algal blooms in these lakes.

We are seeking to release an options report for maintaining good water quality in Lake Burley Griffin in 2027. This will be developed in consultation with stakeholders in the management of the lake and catchment: Traditional Custodians, the National Capital Authority, Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council, Icon Water and the New South Wales Government. We recognise how important the lake is to Canberrans who will want to have a say in the future management of the lake, and we'll seek public feedback on any potential options developed.

The government will then develop the Lake Ginninderra plan, which will include a plan for Yerrabi Pond.

There are also lessons learned from the construction of assets and our research that can be applied elsewhere, outside of these catchments. For example, there have been calls for the government to develop a waterways plan for Yarralumla Creek. The Suburban Land Agency, supported by the Healthy Waterways team, will develop a report this year on water-sensitive urban design options for this creek based on lessons learned from our

investigations in the Lake Tuggeranong catchment and elsewhere. This will be a useful input to planning activities for the Southern Gateway and Yarralumla Creek corridor, including the North Curtin section that is being planned in collaboration with the National Capital Authority.

The government is committed to ensuring that the interventions we make to improve water quality have lasting impacts. For example, an extra \$3 million/year has been dedicated to the maintenance of the 26 Healthy Waterways assets already in Canberra. This will ensure that they continue to perform at their full potential. The Environment and Utilities section within City Operations conducts routine inspections of these assets to monitor operational performance, identify emerging issues and target maintenance activities. An independent audit of Healthy Waterways sites has also been completed, providing external verification of asset condition and performance.

The condition of our waterways also needs to be closely monitored so we can keep the public safe and adaptively manage our investments to improve water quality.

The Environment Protection Authority, City Operations and ACT Health work together to monitor, assess, and communicate health risks in designated swimming areas within ACT waterways, with the exception of Lake Burley Griffin, which is the responsibility of the National Capital Authority.

Lakes and rivers may be closed to public access if levels of blue-green algae or faecal coliforms are deemed to be a risk to public health according to criteria in the ACT Guidelines for Recreational Water Quality. The ACT Government tests water weekly through sampling or visual observations and if this triggers action under the Guidelines, it gives this information to City Operations and they

update their website and on-site signage as soon as is practicable.

These assessments are not undertaken in real time, as it takes time to complete water analyses. The provision of real-time public reporting of key water quality data will not occur until appropriate sensor technology and associated networked data systems are invented and commercialised.

This is why the ACT Government joined the Australian Research Council Internet of Things Water Hub as a major partner last year. The Hub aims to develop such technology over the next five years.

The government also supports other programs to monitor the condition of our waterways. The highest profile is the citizen science 'Waterwatch' program, where an army of volunteers undertake monthly water quality testing at 140 sites across waterways in the ACT, as well as bi-annual waterbug diversity and biennial streamside vegetation condition assessments.

Separately, the Office of Water also undertakes regular monitoring of:

- streamflow across the ACT;
- multiple water quality parameters in lakes and rivers in the ACT, focussed on warmer months;
- river health, based on macroinvertebrate data collected and analysed by experts.

The government recognises both community expectations for accessing lakes, ponds and waterways for their amenity and recreational purposes. We also recognise that many of Canberra's suburbs were designed before the concept of water sensitive urban design had been developed, and even where they have water sensitive designs, there will still be an elevated level of nutrient pollution in stormwater compared to natural and many rural catchments.

In conclusion, the government has been doing excellent work over many years to improve the quality of our lakes and waterways. The government plans to continue this work and aspires to make a noticeable positive improvement in water quality.

On this point, the Swimmable Cities Charter has been useful in some jurisdictions for inspiring action to improve water quality in natural waterways. The government has considered signing up to the Charter, but I note that the provisions in the Charter are non-binding, and as I have outlined, the government is already committed to implementing a wide range of activities to improve water quality for multiple benefits, including making it safer and more accessible for swimming, and the additional administrative burden would not add value. In addition, the Charter covers natural waterways, which most of our urban waterways are not. For those reasons, the government has decided not to sign onto the Charter.

I thank Members for their continuing advocacy for our beautiful lakes and rivers. This government is committed to ensuring they are as healthy as they can be. I'm excited to see how the substantial investment over many years that I've outlined will further improve Canberra's waterways. I thank the Assembly for the opportunity to provide this response.