



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

---

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY  
Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA (Deputy Chair), Mr Ed Cocks MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the waste management of absorbent hygiene products

**Submission Number: 6**

**Date Authorised for Publication: 27 September 2022**



26 September 2022

Dr Marisa Paterson MLA  
Committee Chair  
Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change  
and Biodiversity  
ACT Legislative Assembly

<mailto:LACommitteeECCB@parliament.act.gov.au>

Dear Dr Paterson

**Submission to the Inquiry into the waste management of absorbent hygiene products**

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry (Attachment 1).

As the owner, and operator of Canberra's wastewater network, we have a vested interest, on behalf of the Canberra community, in the appropriate disposal of absorbent hygiene products.

We look forward to the opportunity to collaborate with the ACT Government and stakeholders on reducing the impact of absorbent hygiene products on our wastewater network and more broadly, the Canberra environment.

If you have any questions, please contact [REDACTED], Manager Communications and Engagement at [communications@iconwater.com.au](mailto:communications@iconwater.com.au).

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

Davina McCormick  
General Manager Customer Engagement

## **Attachment 1.**

### **Submission to the Inquiry into the waste management of absorbent hygiene products**

Icon Water welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry. As the owner and operator of Canberra's wastewater network, we have a vested interest, on behalf of the Canberra community, in the appropriate disposal of absorbent hygiene products.

#### **About Icon Water**

Icon Water is the ACT's supplier of essential water and wastewater services. Icon Water has been part of the community for over 100 years; sourcing, treating and supplying water, and managing Canberra's wastewater services. We play a fundamental role in the community – providing essential services that contribute to public health and the future prosperity and liveability of the region.

Our goal is to provide safe and reliable water and wastewater services while supporting liveability of the region and sustainability of Canberra. In managing Australia's largest inland sewage treatment plant, we return over 60 per cent of the water Canberra uses back into the environment.

#### **Introduction**

All wastewater utilities, in Australia and overseas, are faced with the issue of wet wipes, sanitary products and other insoluble materials entering the wastewater collection and treatment systems. The issue was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic when a shortage of toilet paper resulted in customers flushing greater quantities of wet wipes and other non-flushable items. Whilst we recognise the focus of the inquiry is on reducing the negative impacts of absorbent hygiene products being disposed of to landfill, it is crucial that that they are not incorrectly disposed of into the wastewater network as an alternate method of disposal.

#### **Network impacts**

Absorbent hygiene products including wet wipes and sanitary (including incontinence) products contribute significantly to blockages across our wastewater network each year. Blockages within our wastewater network can result in overflow to environment, inconvenience to the community through interrupted services and can be costly to rectify. While toilet paper is designed to break down quickly in water, hygiene products including wipes and sanitary products do not break down after being flushed. These items need to be removed from sewage at some point in the wastewater treatment process, whether it be at the pipe or pump blockages or at our treatment plant. Blocked sewers may also lead to overflows, which can lead to sewage flowing back into houses through drains. As we regularly promote to the public - only the 3Ps should be flushed down the toilet – pee, poo and (toilet) paper.

Clearing a blockage involves our crew getting down in the sewer and manually tearing apart huge clumps of rubbish, mostly made up of wet wipes and sanitary products. Not only is this physically unpleasant for our staff, but it also causes significant disruptions to the lives of Canberrans. Ultimately, it is also costly for our community as this adds to the cost base for providing wastewater services to the community.

The pipes that run from a home to the main sewer are only a few inches wide. They can also become blocked easily and if blocked, sewage can quickly back up into a street, garden or a home. Internal plumbing is the responsibility of the homeowner, as are the costs to rectify the issue.

#### **Financial impacts**

Absorbent hygiene products contribute to 2.5 per cent of blockages in our mains with an annual cost of \$40,000. This does not include associated costs for blockage clearing at the pump station or treatment plant.

#### **Environmental and health impacts**

Environmental compliance and protecting the environment is paramount to Icon Water. Our primary wastewater treatment plant, Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Centre uses physical, chemical and biological treatment processes to remove solids, nutrients and pathogens from the raw sewage. These

treatment processes ensure that the water discharged into the Molonglo River is within the approved parameters to protect public health and the environment.

Inappropriate disposal of absorbent hygiene products has detrimental impacts on the sewage network which in turn can negatively impact the local environment due to overflows caused by blockages. This includes direct impacts to water quality within wetland areas and in-direct impacts to many species that rely on healthy functioning aquatic environments.

### **Introduction of the new standard, AS/NZS 5328, *Flushable Products***

On 20 May 2022, Standards Australia published the new AS/NZS 538, Flushable Products Standard. The standard defines criteria for what material can be flushed down the toilet and therefore, what products can be classified 'flushable'. While the standard is voluntary it marks significant progress towards reducing the volume of non-flushable items entering the wastewater network and decreasing the number of sewer blockages.

The standard states that:

*“the primary objective of wastewater systems management is to protect public health, the environment, the work health and safety of workers, and sustainable development. Management also involves considering the impact on any outputs arising from wastewater systems. There are many factors that contribute to the successful operation of wastewater systems. One of them is the prevention of blockages. When blockages occur, there is an unacceptable risk that wastewater may spill from the system and create public health and environmental risks along with otherwise unnecessary expenditure in rectifying the issues.”<sup>1</sup>*

Importantly the standard outlines the test methods and criteria for determining the flushability of products, such as wet wipes, kitty litter, tampons, sanitary pads and other insoluble products. The standard also includes advice on the requirements for labelling products that are flushable. Where products are flushable a new logo will feature on the products showing a person disposing of waste into a toilet. To our knowledge, given its relatively recent introduction, so far there have been no products approved to display the flushable standard logo

### **Supporting behavior change**

In conjunction with government policies, it is important that education and awareness initiatives continue to provide our community with information on how and where to dispose of absorbent hygiene products and the importance of maintaining appropriate drain care. To support this, Icon Water is developing a wastewater literacy program that builds upon our current **Free the Poo** campaign.

The Free the Poo campaign was developed to specifically build the community's awareness of our wastewater network. Key messaging for this campaign highlights the impacts of wet wipes and other non-flushable items on the wastewater network when they are flushed down the toilet or poured down the drain. Further information is available on our website (see [Free the Poo | Icon Water](#)).

This campaign aims to change our community's flushing and drain care habits. We know behaviour change takes time, which is why we developed a staged approach that will span across several years beginning with the topic of wet wipes. Evaluation research for the campaign in August 2022 found that 40% of participants had seen the campaign so far, of whom at least 24% claim specifically to have stopped flushing any wet wipes. Based on there being roughly 160,000 households in Canberra, this means that at least 9.6% or around 15,360 households say that they have responded positively to the campaign by changing their behaviour regarding wet wipe disposal, up from around 7,000 households in November 2021.

The next phase of the Free the Poo campaign, specifically focused on sanitary products, will assist Canberrans to understand the impacts of flushing these items down the toilet and where to dispose of items. An important insight identified as part of our developmental research is that many people only flush sanitary products when a suitable disposal bin is not provided. This is often the case in public toilets

---

<sup>1</sup> Standards Australia, [Store | Standards Australia](#)

throughout Canberra. Therefore, while building literacy around this issue is important, so is encouraging businesses, schools, and public facilities to provide access to appropriate disposal units, ideally within each cubicle.

We will seek to coordinate with the ACT Government to support aligned messaging between our campaign and outcomes of this inquiry to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes regarding disposal of sanitary (and absorbent hygiene) products.

### **Closing remarks**

Icon Water welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with ACT Government and stakeholders on reducing the impact of absorbent hygiene products on our wastewater network and more broadly, the Canberra environment. There are clear synergies between what we do and the intent of this inquiry and the introduction of the ACT Government's Period Products and Facilities (Access) Bill 2022 and related inquiry.

For further information on this submission or to explore future collaboration relating to initiatives under these two important inquiries, please contact [REDACTED], Manager Communications and Engagement at [communications@iconwater.com.au](mailto:communications@iconwater.com.au).