

Report on Western Australia's progress with implementing the National Water Quality Management Strategy

Outstanding issue, 2002 assessment

Outstanding issue: Western Australia is to finalise and publicly release a State water quality implementation plan and completed draft strategy guidelines for freshwater and marine water quality, drinking water, and water quality monitoring and reporting.

Reference: Water reform agreement, clause 8(b) and (d)

In the 2002 National Competition Policy (NCP) Assessment, the Council found that Western Australia had not met certain water reform obligations relating to the National Water Quality Management Strategy (NWQMS). The assessment found that Western Australia had not fully implemented aspects of the NWQMS according to the timetable it agreed with the Council in the 2001 assessment. As a result, the Council could not be sure that Western Australia would deliver the outcomes of the national strategy and meet its water quality commitments on time.

In discussions with the Council at the time of the assessment, Western Australia undertook to address its NWQMS obligations and to outline the progress it had achieved via consultative meetings with the Council in December 2002 and March 2003. It was agreed that, through this process, Western Australia would:

- finalise the State Water Quality Management Strategy implementation plan, which has the objective of ensuring integrated and coordinated action across government agencies and with stakeholders;
- finalise specific State based implementation plans to reflect the national strategy guidelines for freshwater and marine water quality (national guideline 4), drinking water quality (national guidelines 5 and 6), and water quality monitoring and reporting (national guideline 7); and
- achieve demonstrable progress with implementing NWQMS guidelines 8 and 11 to 15, including where possible draft State implementation plans for these national guidelines.

In the 2002 assessment, the Council foreshadowed that it may submit a report to the Treasurer recommending a suspension of some of Western Australia's 2002-03 NCP payments if the consultative meetings showed that Western Australia was not achieving sufficient progress with these matters.

The Council also advised that it would assess Western Australia's progress with implementing the NWQMS in the 2003 annual assessment.

Activity since the 2002 assessment

Both consultative meetings agreed at the time of the 2002 assessment have now been conducted. At the second meeting on 31 March 2003, Western Australia noted the following progress and anticipated outcomes in relation to NWQMS implementation.

- Western Australia has completed a final draft of the State Water Quality Management Strategy implementation plan and is preparing this for publication. Western Australia expects to publish this document before 30 June 2003;
- Western Australia has made progress with implementing the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines. In particular:
 - a Memorandum of Understanding between the Department of Health and the Water Corporation is in place and a media release announcing the adoption of the guidelines is with the Minister for Health;
 - a Statement of Planning Policy for Public Drinking Water Sources has been approved by Cabinet and is expected to be published by June 2003;
 - a recreation policy for Crown Land Priority 1 drinking water areas has been drafted and is ready for government endorsement and publication; and
 - a planner's manual on land use planning and drinking water protection has been released.
- Western Australia advised that it is still to release the guidelines on freshwater and marine quality. Western Australia will need more time to ensure there is consistency between the approaches being taken by the Environmental Protection Authority and the Natural Resource Management Council, both of which have responsibilities in this area, before finalising and releasing the guidelines. Western Australia undertook to release the guidelines as soon as possible, although it was unable to provide an estimate of when this would be done. Western Australia emphasised the importance of ensuring that the Environmental Protection Authority and the Natural Resource Management Council take a consistent approach to water quality management.
- Western Australia provided a progress update on each of modules 8 and 11 to 15. Western Australia:

- is developing an implementation plan for the groundwater protection guideline (national guideline 8). Western Australia has prepared a position paper to guide its work on this matter;
- has scheduled work on developing a module on effluent management (national guideline 11) for 2003-04;
- advised that the Water Corporation is happy with the guidelines now in place regarding the handling and disposal of trade and industrial waste (national guideline 12);
- advised that the Biosolids Guidelines released in February 2002 outline the State's current requirements (national guideline 13);
- advised that the issue of reclaimed water (national guideline 14) is covered in the State Water Strategy released in February 2003, and that a State Water Strategy Working Group will be established shortly to develop a guideline on reclaimed water and other matters raised in the strategy; and
- advised that an implementation guide on sewerage overflows (national guideline 15) was completed in November 2001.

Assessment

Western Australia has made progress towards meeting its obligations under the NWQMS through the consultative meetings that took place after the 2002 assessment. Although the State has not yet published its State implementation plan, it expects to do this prior to the 2003 assessment. Similarly, Western Australia's modules covering drinking water quality and fresh and marine water quality, while not yet published, are well advanced.

Under the program agreed by CoAG for water reform, governments need to meet their obligations under the NWQMS by 2003. Given this, the Council will expect Western Australia to have finalised and released its major strategy documents by the 2003 assessment. The Council acknowledges that Western Australia has devoted additional attention to implementing its NWQMS obligations since the 2002 assessment, and that its recent progress means that a reduction in competition payments for 2002-03 is not warranted. Notwithstanding this, given the timeframe set by CoAG and the recent attention given to NWQMS implementation in Western Australia, the Council will regard any further slippage by the State unfavourably in the 2003 assessment.