

Greens WA Policy Initiative



Groundwater Management Action Plan

February 3, 2013

Despite an image as a dry state, Western Australia has been historically blessed with high quality and plentiful groundwater resources. Perth has avoided tough water restrictions largely because we have been able to rely on the Gnangara and Jandakot mounds for up to two-thirds of the city's drinking water supply.

But many of our best groundwater resources are drying up. The water in these aquifers is recharged by rainfall, but when we take too much water too fast, and modify the landscape so that less water percolates down, this combines with the drying climate to cause these aquifers' decline.

We ought to be able to rely on the Department of Water to research, monitor and regulate our ground and surface water resources in a fair, timely and transparent way. Water is arguably our most precious public resource – one that will determine the future health, viability and enjoyment of generations to come.

Yet the Barnett Government has sidelined this Department as a virtual irrelevance, slashing its already-overstretched resources, and allowing numerous key water planning and reporting documents to be withheld from the public domain.

As the WA Greens Water Spokesperson, I have asked numerous questions in Parliament, exposing the Department's abject failures to carry out its own policies on metering water use and efficiency, and to ensure compliance and ensure the sustainable allocation of our water resources. I have written to the WA Auditor-General urging for another review of the Department's actions – this would be the third such review of the Department since 2003 and is greatly needed.

This document, the *Groundwater Management Action Plan*, outlines how and why we must improve the management of our groundwater resources into the future. Please note that a separate document, the *Being Smart With Water Action Plan*, focuses specifically on the Greens' recommendations for how we should manage WA's drinking water supply to 2029.

As with our counterpart document on drinking water supply, this document draws on four years of research, collaboration with stakeholders and awareness-raising by my office. I welcome your comments and feedback.



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Greens WA Member for
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Why action is urgently required

In 2003, the WA Auditor-General released a damning report on the Department of Water (then known as the Water and Rivers Commission)'s management of WA's ground and surface water.

The major deficiencies he identified included the agency's handling of groundwater allocation limits, water use monitoring, licence processing and compliance.

He also noted that funding for water resource management had been reduced, despite the fact that water use was increasing dramatically and the workload was increasing.

The Auditor-General again examined the Department's activities in 2009, finding some improvement but plenty of work still outstanding, particularly in regard to water resource allocation planning and monitoring for compliance.

The Greens believe that since 2009, the Department's effectiveness as the State's water resource manager has regressed to the same level as in 2003 – thus the Greens have sought a third review by the Auditor-General.

However, we do not need to rely on the State's departmental watchdog to tell us that water is being poorly managed – we also have the findings of the National Water Commission, which has highlighted WA's failings in its annual national scorecard.

It's time water was treated in WA as the vital and precious resource that it is, by providing fair, transparent and effective management.

The following Action Plan should be immediately implemented as a first step towards this goal.



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Nine-Point Action Plan

1. Complete and release all missing water allocation plans and evaluation statements

At least six key public planning documents, known as water allocation plans, are overdue, including an allocation plan for the Gngangara groundwater system. This compares to the Auditor-General's finding in 2009 that there was only one out-of-date allocation plan during the course of 2008.

In addition, Evaluation Statements, which are supposed to provide an annual summary on how the Department is performing against allocation plans, are missing numerous water resource management areas. WA's tardiness in producing these statements was highlighted in the last National Water Commission Report Card, in 2011.

The Greens would ensure the Department of Water immediately released all completed groundwater allocation plans and evaluation statements, and expedite the completion of all others that are overdue.

2. Wind back licensed water use where it exceeds sustainable allocation limits

Licensed groundwater use exceeding allocation limits in groundwater areas was a concern raised in the Auditor-General's 2003 report and remains a concern today. According to answers given to the Greens' questions in Parliament, several water resource management areas remain over-allocated.

The Greens would reduce the over-allocation of licensed water use through: not renewing licences for water use that exceeds limits; by making much greater effort to ensure efficient water use by existing licensed users; and investigating how to increase water trading.

3. Roll-out the Department of Water metering policy State-wide

The Department of Water has a good policy on metering, called *Strategic policy 5.03 – Metering the taking of water* – but the policy is not being implemented.

Under the policy, government-owned meters will be installed in priority management areas where there is a high demand for water resources. In these areas, licences for more than 5 megalitres (ML) of water per annum will be required to meter and report their usage, while in non-priority areas, starting from 1 July 2010, only licences of more than 50ML/year should be required to do so.

As the Greens' inquiries have revealed, of 3,063 licences entitling the owners to each extract amounts more than 5ML/year in priority areas State-wide, less than half have a metering condition on their licence. Meanwhile, of 1,854 licences outside of priority areas that are for amounts of water more than 50ML/year, only 51% have a metering condition, meaning nearly half are not being managed in accordance with policy.

The Greens would roll out the 2009 metering policy State-wide immediately. Water licences for five million litres of water a year or higher would have mandatory metering and reporting requirements.



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Nine-Point Action Plan

4. Review current fines for serious offenders who breach their water licence conditions.

The Department has rarely penalised people who breach their water licences by deliberately abstracting large amounts of water and when they have, the value of the fine has appeared small compared to the comparable value of the water. For example, in 2012 a grower who had tampered with his bore meter was reportedly fined \$2,800 for taking 11,030 kilolitres (KL) from the Gngangara system over what he was licensed to abstract. If bought at scheme water rates the amount of water the man stole would be worth \$22,500.

The Greens would review penalties for serious and serial offenders against their water licences to ensure that fines imposed act as an inadequate deterrent. Consideration would be given to other possible forms of penalty under the Rights in Water and Irrigation Act, such as temporary or permanent withdrawal of a licence.

5. Require the Department of Water to implement its water conservation/efficiency policy

As with its metering policy, the Department's *Operational Policy 1.02 – Policy on Water Conservation/Efficiency Plans* is a good policy but is not being adequately implemented.

Under the policy, all licences that require operating strategies will be required to develop water conservation/efficiency plans (WCEPs) as part of their license to operate. In addition, WCEPs will be required when the Department considers that licensees are needlessly wasting water; and when the license is for water from a water resource that is fully allocated or under stress.

The Green's inquiries have revealed that in 2011, there were 401 water licences across WA which should have had a WCEP, but less than 10% of these did. Meanwhile, there were only 21 WCEPs amongst 4,457 licences for water in over-allocated areas.

The Greens would require the Department of Water to immediately implement its existing water efficiency/conservation policy.

6. Require the Department of Water to meet environmental objectives for Gngangara Mound

As the State water resource manager, the Department is required to submit annual and triennial reports to the Environmental Protection Authority stating the Department's compliance with environmental conditions for the protection of Gngangara Mound.

The reports state whether the Department has met specific environmental criteria relating to water levels at 30 wetland and vegetation sites across Gngangara Mound. The latest report states that 16 of the 30 sites are not compliant with the criteria, up from 13 non-compliant sites in 2009-2010.

The Greens would take environmental criteria as set by the Environmental Protection Authority for Gngangara Mound seriously, and require the Department of Water to actively work towards achieving them.



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Nine-Point Action Plan

7. Require the Department of Water to implement and advocate drinking water source protection

One of the Department of Water's roles is to protect current and potential future drinking water sources, including advising on priority zoning for water source areas, thus determining what land uses are allowed in each zone. Disturbingly, the Department of Water has raised no objection to a plan to rezone 152ha on the Jandakot Mound at Banjup zoned 'Rural – Water Protection Zone' to 'urban', which would allow urban development. This is despite the fact that we rely on Jandakot Mound for around 10 billion litres of water a year of public water supply. The WA Planning Commission intends to use the proposed scheme amendment at Banjup as a test case for further re-zoning of drinking water source protection areas on the Jandakot and Gngangara mounds. There are proposals to re-zone an even higher-priority P1 drinking water source protection area on the Gngangara Mound at Pinjar South for industrial use.

The Greens would require the Department of Water to take an active role in advocating for drinking water protection on the Gngangara/Jandakot mounds including initiating scientific research.

8. Require the Department of Water to address non-water regime threats

In its 2012 national assessment of environmental water management, the National Water Commission criticised WA's failure to address and plan for impacts on water resources arising from human and other activity, known as "non-water regime threats".

Too often when a water-related issue emerges requiring a science-based expert response from Government, the Department of Water cedes its responsibilities to other, less suitable agencies. There is growing community concern about hydraulic fracturing or 'fracking' and possible impacts of this on ground and surface water supplies. While still a fledgling industry in WA, fracking in WA for shale and 'tight' gas is forecast to greatly increase. In other countries and jurisdictions, questions about potential threats to water supply from fracking are being addressed through detailed inquiries by state environmental agencies. Yet according to the Greens' inquiries, the Department of Water has no plans to investigate the potential impacts of fracking on WA's water supplies and will largely only address the issue if and when the Department of Mines and Petroleum refers the matter to it.

The Greens would require the Department of Water to assess the cumulative, long-term impact of non-water regime threats including a rapid scale-up of a domestic fracking industry in WA.

9. Maintain or increase Department of Water resources

Despite the evident work to be done if the Department of Water is to achieve better management of the State's water resources, the State Government plans to cut the Department's staff numbers by a fifth this year. This comes as demand for water is increasing and there is increasing concern about the security of future water supply.

The Greens would ensure the Department of Water's 2011-2012 staffing levels were maintained or increased, so that the Department is capable of implementing its existing policies and obligations under the National Water Initiative.



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