

Example policy brief: water use in perth



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To the desk of Hon. Bill Marmion. Minister for Water and Environment This policy brief brings to light the issue of household water consumption in Perth, particularly the need to examine the potential for large scale water savings in the domestic sphere. Domestic water use is nearly double that of Melbourne and Brisbane, whilst local water supplies are critically low. This brief summarises the history of water usage in Perth, it accounts culturally for the reasons that we use so much on our gardens. There is a section that outline the dimensions of issue, who is using how much?

The benefit that multi-story housing has on water consumption, as well as the socio-economic gap between the high income earners and on average their tendency to have a higher instance of garden ownership and the use more water generally. Finally this brief will inform the reader on the relationships that interact with the issue, particularly the levels of government and how each one interacts. As well as governance, there is information on the complex interaction between the public and the policy makers.

In order to conserve valuable water resources policy makers have to analyse the current water use situation and identify key areas where consumption can be influenced or if necessary forced. Currently the Water Corporation identifies ex-house usage as the area with the biggest potential for reduction, as shown in figure1, ex-house usage vs in-house usage. Ex-house water usage is a term used to describe all private citizen water usage that doesn't occur within the house; this can extend to pools and ponds but is largely comprised of garden and lawn use.

Domestic water usage per person in Perth is twice that of our east coast neighbours Melbourne and Brisbane, in addition to having the lowest annual rainfall it isn't particularly surprising that Perth's' future water outlooks are the bleakest. Historically water usage has always been high as water rates and restrictions were not imposed until the late 1960's where a ' pay as you go' scheme allowed 150kl of water per household per annum, then a charge for every extra kilolitre. This led to a halving of usage from 508kl in 1975/76 to 288kl in 1977/78.

Since this point in time there has been very little further reduction per capita and since the population has increased immensely the strain on supply has never been greater. The cause of this high water use in the garden is both cultural and environmental. Perth is largely built on sandy soil, in a lot of areas the original soil is beach sand. These sandy soils are very inefficient due to their inability to retain moisture and nutrients, thus requiring more water relative to other soil types.

And the nature of rainfall is not befitting of the exotic and ' English' style gardens that have been traditionally grown since settlement. An important point to take into consideration is that owning a detached house on a quarter acre block with a lawn and garden area was the aspiration of Australians since post WW2. Significant because it represents the defensive nature the many perth residents take towards water usage in the garden, as the cultural norm. It also explains the large disparity between the number of detached homes and the number of higher density dwellings.

Figure 2 highlights 2 dimensions to the problem of ex-house water usage in Perth, as discussed above the social tendency to reside in detached private residences is an issue because they on average are a less efficient in their use of water, (no multistorey vs multistory). The differences in use can largely be attributed to the 6% difference in water usage ex-house as shown in figure1 but also the relationship between the housing density and the average income. People of lower incomes are over represented in multistory housing because it is more affordable and it often can be provide by the government.

Where are more affluent people tend to not worry about the cost of water and maintain their gardens. The difference in water usage by income is represented in figure 2. This point is reinforced by figure 3 which illustrates the increasing percentage of lawn and garden ownership relative to the level of income, with the highest income brackets all having high percentages of ownership. A point of concern is that whilst the relationship between private green space ownership and income exists, there is still a very large portion of the total population consuming water just for gardening purposes. Figure 4: Reticulation water usage

The final issue of ex-house water usage is the usage of reticulation, and the false perception that its more efficient than hand watering. As shown in figure 4 water usage for automatic reticulation is nearly double that of non-automatic. The State Government: the state government is the chief authority on the issue of domestic water use, and holds the most influence and power in the issue. The state government is currently a liberal party lead by Collin Barnett. This Stakeholder is the figure head for numerous

government agencies, namely the Department of Environment and conservation, the Department of Water and Water Corporation.

Whilst the state government maintains a relationship with the commonwealth government on the issue, there tends to only be a minor relationship where the state may apply for money to implement larger scale initiatives such as building dams. The motivations of the state government are to provide water a secure a sustainable water future, generally at the lowest cost possible. Policy decisions tend to be made in four year blocks and water use restrictions tend to be soft, in order to secure election support and not fall out of favour with the voters.

Generally the state government in power tries to maintain its relationship to the people by taking in considerations from lobbyist groups, in this instance it's the Conservation Council of Western Australia. The local Government structure is based around towns and councils, this division of Perth into smaller policy sections allows for the implementing and policing of the state governments policies. The smaller community based administration functions also tend to do most of the liasoning between the public and private sector alike.

As well as this they provide much of the footwork labour to the Government departments, by policing the watering restrictions and fining the households that break the policy conditions. This stakeholder has very little influence in terms of policy decisions, their input may be taken into consideration by the state level policy makers but ultimately the state makes decisions. The local government has influence when it comes to encouraging its citizens,

particularly those in community groups to implement further water wise measures and foster a community spirit that be sustainable.

This stakeholder's motivation is to ensure its water use is as low as possible, whilst not falling out of favour with the ratepayers in the suburb, to ensure this it will most likely pass any responsibility for policy decisions onto the government. Community groups and forums can be on either side of politics and have any number of views on an issue. These groups are important because they can increase or decrease the chance of a policy being adopted, and if there is to be a negative backlash.

Therefore their influence on a community based level is quite large, whereas on a state wide level it's fairly small. In terms of their relationship to other stakeholders, community groups can put a degree of peer pressure on their peers to adopt a water wise scheme or to oppose a government that is too heavy handed. Due to the diversity of community groups, their aims and motives it's difficult to define, the only certain is that community groups are run by the most passionate and vocal of the cohort, and they all want the best for their specific situation.