



Water quality information sheet 8 January 2016

Report of the standing committee on ecologically sustainable development in relation to the quality of Perth's water supply 2000 - summary



Warragamba Dam. Photo A.Hollingworth contributed by WaterNSW.

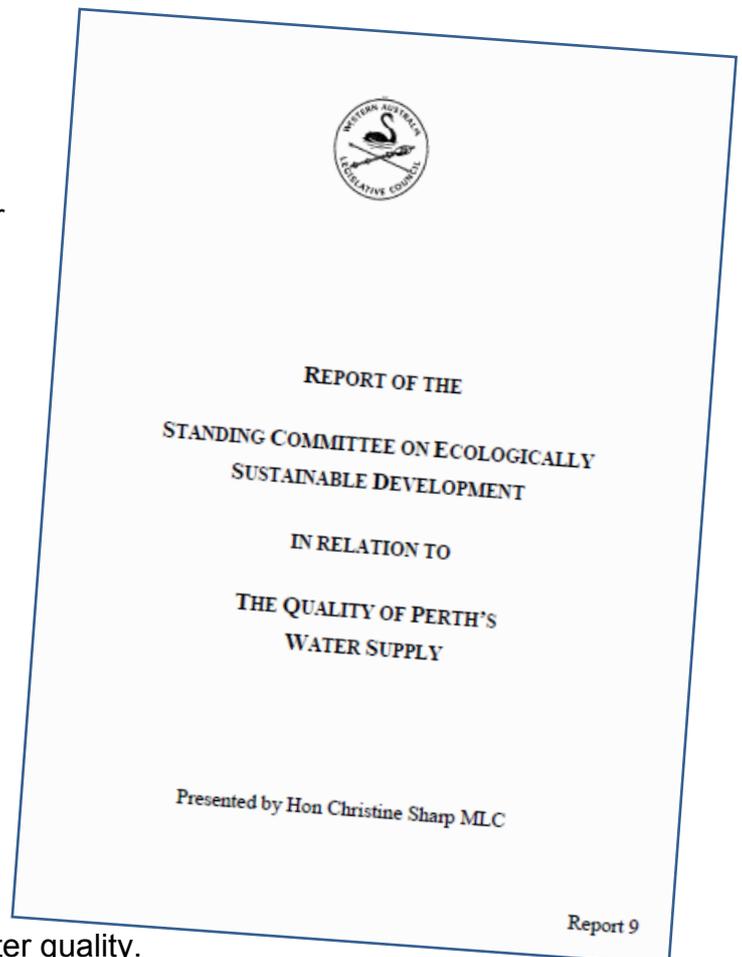
In 1997, a Parliamentary standing committee on ecologically sustainable development was established in Western Australia. After the Sydney water crisis of 1998, the committee's function was amended to include an investigation into the adequacy of current systems of monitoring, preventing contamination, dealing with health risks and general water quality of Perth's drinking water supplies. This information sheet summarises the main findings of their report released in 2000.

Sydney water crisis

Two pathogens called cryptosporidium and giardia were detected in Sydney's Warragamba Dam in July of 1998, and authorities responded by issuing a 'boil water alert' to consumers. Fortunately, no serious outbreak of disease occurred. However the scare was enough to alert Australians to the dangers of pathogens in drinking water, and a formal inquiry was launched in Sydney, with other states and territories following.

Pressures on our drinking water catchments

The standing committee's report noted that the Water and Rivers Commission (now Department of Water) and the Water Corporation were under increasing pressure to compromise catchment protection by permitting further multiple uses in catchments. This was of concern because full water treatment (just one part of a multiple-barrier system against contamination) was viewed by the committee as the last resort to protecting water quality. A similar situation still exists in Perth today.



Prevention is the key

The committee found that the adoption of catchment protection was the major weapon in preventing contamination of water supplies. Recommendation 3 states *“that the protection of water quality to meet public health objectives have primacy in the planning of integrated catchment management.”*

“... to maintain the quality of Perth’s water the first priority should be to protect the water through good land use planning to protect the catchment providing the water ... Using treatment to deal with contamination is a second-best option.”

The committee considered the following to be key components of ensuring a high quality water supply:

- adequate monitoring system
- measures to prevent contamination
- being able to detect and deal with identified risks
- mechanisms for reporting to government and consumers.

The report

also found that the water catchments feeding Perth’s dams are amongst the cleanest in the world. The committee identified that this was due to the foresight of earlier generations in keeping human habitation and development out of these catchments.

“The Committee considers it is necessary to anticipate and prevent harm in water quality management rather than just react to problems after they arise.”

“Recommendation 2: That water source protection plans for the Perth metropolitan water supply be completed as a matter of urgency.” This recommendation has since been completed by the Department of Water.

Support for existing approach

The committee recognised the value of the preventive, risk-based management approach to drinking water source protection and acknowledged support for the preparation of drinking water source protection reports and the continued

implementation of the *Australian drinking water guidelines* (ADWG).

Community awareness

The Sydney Water inquiry found that there was an absence of a public education program in regards to water quality, and stated that the community must have an opportunity to develop an informed understanding of water quality issues and risks to public health. The committee found that WA was comparatively well-placed due to the establishment of the Advisory Committee for the Purity of Water that reports to the Department of Health. They stated that this has enhanced public confidence in the reporting of water quality data.

In summary

The 2000 standing committee report provided a great deal of support for WA’s existing water protection and land use planning framework, including legislation, policy, agency cooperation, implementation of the ADWG and development of water source protection reports. The preventive, risk-based, multiple barrier approach was identified as the best way to protect our drinking water sources. It should continue to be used to protect the public health interests of Perth’s water consumers.



Picnickers downstream of reservoir at Mundaring Weir, Perth

Citation: Sharp, Hon C (MLC and Chairman of the Standing Committee) 2000, *Report of the Standing Committee on Ecologically Sustainable Development in relation to the quality of Perth’s water supply*, Legislative Council, Perth, Western Australia. You can obtain a copy of the standing committee report from the State Law Publisher phone (08) 9426 0000 or visit www.slp.wa.gov.au.