

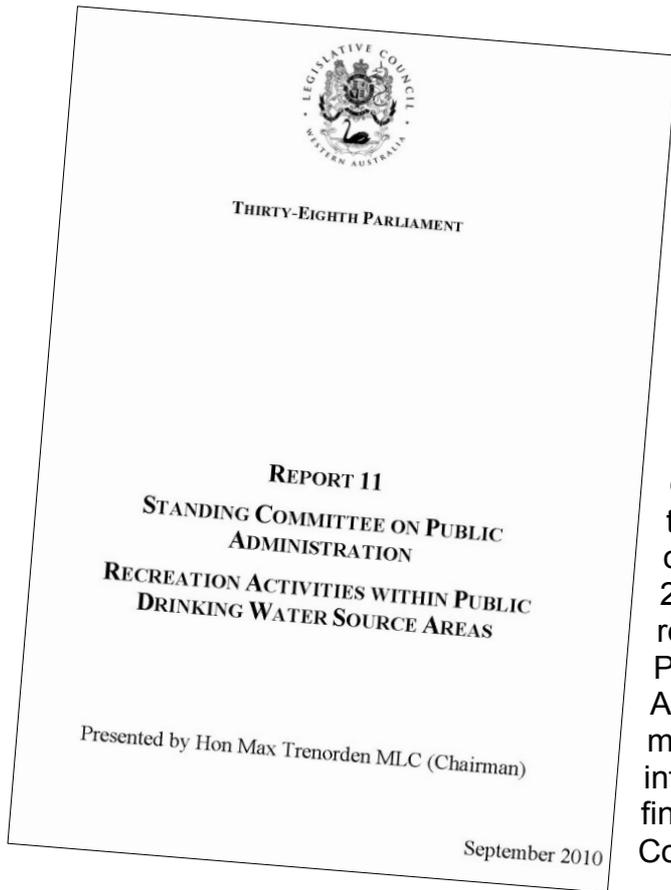


Water quality information sheet 35

January 2016

Securing Western Australia's water future

Standing Committee on Public Administration report on recreation within public drinking water source areas 2010 - summary



In 2009, a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Administration inquiry was established to investigate recreation activities within public drinking water source areas (PDWSAs). The committee was formed due to increasing pressure for recreational access to drinking water catchments and conflicting advice on the water quality risks of these activities. In 2010, the committee reported to the Parliament of Western Australia with recommendations on how to manage recreation within PDWSAs. This information sheet summarises the main findings and recommendations of the Standing Committee's report.

“The Committee finds that the objectives of providing safe water and achieving the health and social benefits of interaction with natural environments are not compatible in the same geographical area. Public drinking water source areas are best committed to the single purpose of providing safe water.”

Recreational access to public drinking water source areas

The committee found that recreation in natural environments is important for various reasons but that the protection of drinking water sources within these environments remains the paramount consideration. The committee was persuaded by evidence that it is the very presence of humans in the environment that poses the highest risk to

water quality and public health. The report emphasised that PDWSA protection is the first line of defence, noting that microbial pathogens can cause illness, hospitalisation and death. The current approach of limiting recreational access *“makes drinking water safe, simple to treat and less expensive.*

“...it is the very presence of humans in an ecosystem that poses the most risk to water quality and therefore risk to ‘whole of community’, human health.”

”The committee was supportive of the Department of Water’s 2003 Policy and guidelines for recreation within PDWSA on Crown land and



Reservoir sign

found that the policy did not lock people out of PDWSAs and utilised appropriate risk mitigation measures. It allowed limited, passive, land-based activities in the outer catchment of PDWSAs. The committee highlighted this support in Recommendation 1 *“The Committee recommends no increase in the amount of current recreational activity in the outer catchments of public drinking water source areas.”*

“Western Australians have enjoyed safe drinking water for over a century but the committee observed a loss of collective memory regarding the health events such as the outbreaks of typhoid between 1895 to 1900, that prompted our preventive approach to drinking water source protection.”

Protection of public drinking water source areas
The committee was very supportive of a preventive risk based approach to drinking water source protection. While they acknowledged that it is possible to treat drinking water to reduce potential health risks arising from recreational access to the source, they

found that such treatments entail significant cost and cannot guarantee a safe drinking water supply.

The committee noted that the impacts of recreation on drinking water quality are cumulative and that allowing people to undertake activities that are considered low risk can set a precedent for other activities that also claim to be low risk, resulting in a cumulative high risk.

“Where scientific evidence has neither demonstrated nor is conclusive about the impacts of a particular type of recreational activity on source water, a precautionary approach to source protection is essential.”

The committee stated that cumulative recreational activity has ecological impacts in catchments which pose an unacceptable risk to raw water quality. Given that there is a degree of uncertainty with respect to some of these impacts, the committee found that a precautionary approach (within a risk management framework) is preferred in catchments.

The report was supportive of the use of the precautionary principle to guide access to PDWSAs. Accordingly, Recommendation 9 stated *“.. all future reviews of Statewide Policy 13 should be based on the imperative of source protection and guided by the precautionary principle.”*



Interstate and international examples

The committee met with experts and water managers from around Australia and the world. They found that WA is fortunate not to have the significant legacy challenges facing many other areas and they cautioned against allowing increased recreation or public access for this reason. The report illustrated this concern by recommending the formal cancellation of a 1994 agreement between the Federation of Western Australian Bushwalkers

The Committee found that humans recreating in source areas pose an unacceptable risk to drinking water quality.

Inc. and the Water Corporation.

Protection into the future

The committee noted that as an increasing proportion of our drinking water is produced by expensive desalination processes and groundwater recovery *“this cost furthers the importance of protecting existing surface water dams and their catchments”* where this treated water is often stored.

Citations: Trenorden, Hon M (MLC and Chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Administration), 2010, *Report 11 – Recreation Activities within Public Drinking Water Source Areas*, 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.