

Annual report on drinking water quality in Victoria

1 July 2005 – 30 June 2006

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www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/water/drinking

Foreword

Victoria's Drinking Water Quality Regulatory Framework recognises the importance of safe drinking water to the ongoing social and economic wellbeing of Victorians. Water is necessary for life, and clean drinking water is necessary to maintain public health. This has been brought into sharp focus by the ongoing drought conditions that much of Victoria has experienced during the past several years.

The drinking water regulatory framework is detailed in two pieces of legislation, the *Safe Drinking Water Act 2003* (the Act), which commenced on 1 July 2004, and the *Safe Drinking Water Regulations 2005* (Regulations), which commenced on 19 July 2005.

The Act and Regulations provide a comprehensive regulatory framework that encompasses a catchment-to-tap, risk-based approach to the management of drinking water quality across the state. The key objectives of this regulatory framework are to ensure:

- where water is supplied as drinking water it is safe to drink
- any water not intended to be drinking water cannot be mistaken for drinking water
- water quality information is disclosed to consumers and is open to public accountability.

This annual report has been prepared in accordance with section 32 of the Act, which requires the Secretary to the Department of Human Services to provide the Minister for Health with an annual report on drinking water quality in Victoria.

This annual report, the second produced under the Act, provides an overview of the operations and implementation of the Act and the performance of water businesses in respect to the 2005–06 reporting period (1 July 2005 to 30 June 2006). It summarises the performance of water businesses against the state's water quality standards, and provides information in relation to water quality incidents and events.

Copies of this report can be obtained from the Department of Human Services' Drinking Water Regulatory Section (1300 761 874), or downloaded from the website: www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/water/drinking

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Executive summary

Victoria's Drinking Water Quality Regulatory Framework is based on the concept of continuous improvement. This concept is articulated through the risk management plans water businesses are required to prepare and implement for their drinking water supplies. This risk-based approach to the maintenance of drinking water quality instils a proactive, rather than reactive, management approach, where risks to drinking water quality are identified and managed.

During the second year of the operation of the *Safe Drinking Water Act 2003* (the Act) the work undertaken during the first year was consolidated and extended, and strong working relationships continued with water businesses and key stakeholders. Some areas where further improvements can be made have been identified, and are detailed in the box overleaf.

Areas of non-compliance with the water quality standards still exist in regional Victoria. There were signs of improvement, as more water localities were compliant with the water quality standards compared to the first reporting period (1 July 2004 to 30 June 2005). This was achieved in spite of decreasing water storage levels caused by the ongoing drought. This is a credit to the affected water businesses, who continued to deliver safe drinking water in difficult circumstances.

Where non-compliances were identified, the Department of Human Services worked with the affected water businesses to put in place undertakings that established agreed courses of action to resolve issues of non-compliance and protect public health. By the end of the reporting period 35 undertakings had been accepted by the Department.

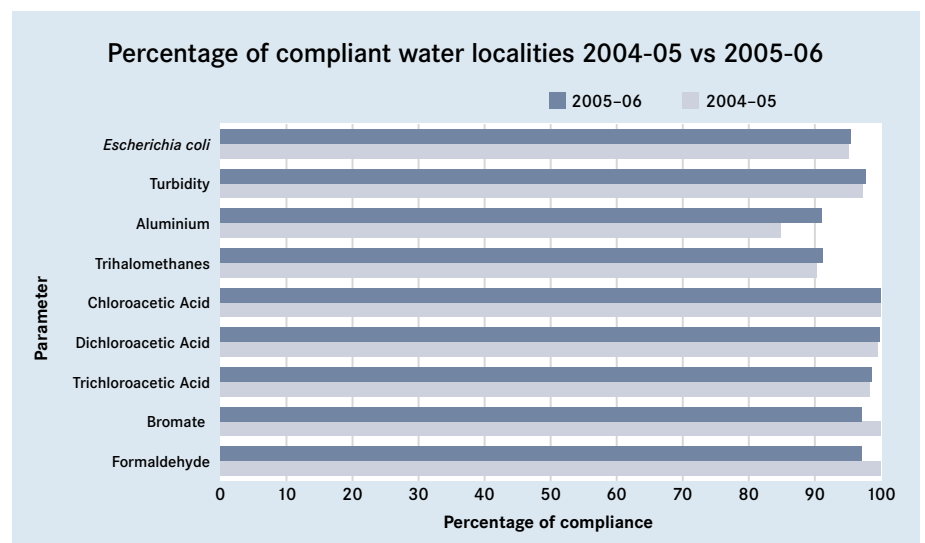
As was the case in the first annual reporting period, drinking water across the Melbourne metropolitan area again achieved 100 per cent compliance with the state's water quality standards.

There were 193 water quality incidents and events reported to the Department by water suppliers during 2005–06, however only one of the reported incidents resulted in notifications of illness. This occurred in the water locality of Tallangatta, where reports of illness were received after a plant

malfunction caused an excess amount of aluminium to enter the water supply system. All reported instances of illness related to short-lived feelings of nausea upon drinking the water. Upon becoming aware of the issue the relevant water business took prompt corrective action to ensure that customers did not consume the water and that the problem was fixed.

The rest of the reported incidents and events were generally minor in nature and principally consisted of the sporadic detection of *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) bacteria and the temporary failures of disinfection equipment.

During the 2005–06 reporting period the vast majority of Victorians had access to safe drinking water. The percentage of water localities compliant to each of the water quality standards increased from the 2004–05 reporting period.



Across the state, compliance with the *E. coli* water quality standard improved from 95 per cent to 95.5 per cent, and compliance with the turbidity standard improved from 97 per cent to 98 per cent.

The results indicate the regulatory framework is supporting water businesses in delivering water quality improvements for Victoria.

Water suppliers are required to report instances of widespread public complaint in relation to drinking water to the Department, as well as provide a summary in their annual reports to the Department of the customer complaints they received. The majority of complaints during the reporting period related to either discoloured water or taste and odour issues.

There are significant challenges to be faced by water businesses during the 2006–07 reporting period, the most pressing being the effect ongoing drought conditions will have on the quantity and quality of water available for drinking. The Department looks forward to working with the Victorian water industry, other government agencies and relevant stakeholders to meet these challenges.

Highlights of the 2005–06 reporting period:

- The Safe Drinking Water Regulations 2005 commenced on 19 July 2005.
- Drinking water across the Melbourne metropolitan area achieved 100 per cent compliance with the state's water quality standards for the second consecutive year.
- Greater than 95 per cent (95.5 per cent) of all water localities across Victoria complied with the *E. coli* standard.
- There was improved compliance with the water quality standards compared to 2004–05. The biggest improvement was compliance with the aluminium standard, which improved from 85 per cent to 91 per cent. This occurred despite the low flow conditions experienced across the state, which in some circumstances adversely affected raw water quality.
- Eighty water analysts were approved under the Regulations.
- By the end of the reporting period all water supply systems, except Mount Stirling, had risk management plans in place. The plan for Mount Stirling was finalised on 1 September 2006.
- A competency-based auditor certification scheme was developed to support the risk management plan audit process.
- Only one of the 193 reported water quality incidents or events resulted in a notification of short-lived illness.
- Thirty-five undertakings to resolve issues of non-compliance with the Act or Regulations were accepted by the Department. The undertakings put in place definite actions to improve compliance with regulatory obligations. The vast majority of these undertakings related to non-compliance with the water quality standards.

Identified areas for further improvement during the 2006–07 reporting period:

- All 493 drinking water localities over the reporting period were monitored for *E. coli*, and 471 (95.5 per cent) were compliant with the standard. Of the 22 localities that did not comply with the standard, eight were also non-compliant for *E. coli* for the 2004–05 reporting period (Box 1 – page 11)
- Priority areas for future undertakings are water localities in the west and northwest of the state, which have been impacted heavily by the drought. The Department is working with affected water businesses to address these issues.