



INFORMATION BULLETIN

PROPOSED DESALINATION PLANT – THE ROLE OF EPA VICTORIA

Publication 1227 May 2008

SUMMARY

EPA Victoria has a key role in assessing the environmental performance of the proposed desalination plant in the Wonthaggi region. EPA will assess whether the proposed design meets the requirements set out under the *Environment Protection Act 1970*. If satisfied that the design meets the requirements, EPA will issue a works approval for the plant. The proponent requires this approval before construction of key elements can begin.

If the plant is approved and established, EPA will regulate the operation of the proposed plant. EPA will also enforce strict controls on the disposal of any wastes generated by the plant.

The purpose of this information bulletin is to explain:

- EPA's role in the environment effects statement (EES) process, and the relationship between the works approval assessment process and the EES process
- EPA's role in assessing the proposed design and operation of the plant; and
- EPA's role in regulating the operation of the plant (if the plant is established).

WHO IS EPA VICTORIA?

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA Victoria) is a statutory body established under the *Environment Protection Act 1970*. EPA works to protect, care for and improve Victoria's environment. This includes regulation of discharges to the environment and the disposal of wastes.

WHAT IS DESALINATION?

Desalination is the process of removing dissolved salts from a saline water source such as seawater, brackish water or wastewater.

The salt content of a saline water source is commonly expressed as milligrams per litre (mg/L) or parts per million (ppm) of total dissolved salts (TDS). Seawater is typically 35,000 to 37,000 mg/L or 35,000 to 37,000 ppm TDS.

Desalination can produce water suitable for drinking. In major Australian reticulated supplies, TDS values range from about 45 mg/L to 750 mg/L (Australian drinking Water Guidelines, National Health and Medical Research Guidelines 2004).

Although various methods can be used to desalinate seawater, thermal (evaporative) and reverse osmosis (membrane-based) methods are the two most commonly used and mature desalination technologies. The reverse osmosis method is proposed for the desalination plant at Wonthaggi.

WHAT WILL THE PROPOSED PROJECT INVOLVE?

The project as it is currently proposed involves:

- a desalination plant sited adjacent to coastline
- a seawater intake tunnel running underground from the plant to an offshore location on the seafloor
- a discharge concentrate outlet tunnel running underground from the plant to an offshore location on the seafloor
- an underground transfer pipeline for the freshwater produced
- a power supply.

WHERE IS THE PROPOSED SITE AND WHO IS RUNNING THE PROJECT?

The proposed location for the plant is on cleared farmland on the Bass Coast approximately 3 km west of Wonthaggi, 90 km south-east of Melbourne.

The Desalination Project team, as part of the Capital Projects Division in the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), is acting as proponent on behalf of the Minister for Water. The desalination plant component of the project will be delivered as a Public-Private Partnership (PPP), meaning that the Government will be in a partnership with the private sector in accordance with the Government's Partnerships Victoria policy guidelines.

WHAT ARE THE REVIEW AND APPROVAL PROCESSES FOR THE PROJECT?

A range of statutory review and approval processes are required for the project to proceed.

The Victorian Minister for Planning decided on 28 December 2007 that the project would be subject to an EES process under the *Environment Effects Act 1978*. The Commonwealth has subsequently accredited the EES process as the required assessment process under its *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), so that the relevant EPBC Act and Victorian requirements are dealt with in a coordinated manner.

Once the proponent has submitted the EES, public comments will be invited. An inquiry to be appointed by the Minister for Planning will consider the EES and public submissions. After receiving the report from the inquiry, the Minister will prepare an assessment report that will then inform the Commonwealth's decision under the EPBC Act, as well as the Victorian statutory decisions. These decisions include:

- EPA works approval for the construction of the desalination plant and an ongoing EPA licence for its operation, in accordance with the *Environment Protection Act 1970*
- relevant authorisations and consents under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* to provide for use and development of project infrastructure
- a Cultural Heritage Management Plan approved in accordance with the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*
- consent for coastal and seabed works under the *Coastal Management Act 1995*
- consents under a range of Acts to enable access to and use of public land for project infrastructure.

Decisions whether to approve the project under the various Acts are generally deferred until the relevant decision-makers have had time to consider the Minister for Planning's assessment report.

EPA WORKS APPROVAL

An EPA works approval is required for certain activities before works associated with them can be constructed.

The works approval process allows EPA to independently assess an application. The applicant has to demonstrate that the proposal, if approved, will not result in unacceptable impacts on the environment.

The works approval application provides information detailing the potential impact of any emissions or wastes generated by the project, if any, upon the air, land and water environments (including groundwater and noise), and how these emissions and wastes will be managed to prevent any adverse impact.

For all works approval applications, EPA conducts an assessment of the proposed works against the objectives of State environment protection policies and guidelines.

In the case of the desalination project, a works approval must be sought prior to beginning construction. The transfer pipeline and any power transmission line to the plant will not require a works approval as the works approval focuses on the desalination plant and the wastes and discharges associated with that plant. If on-site power generation is included in the proposed works, it will require works approval.

Once submitted, a summary of the application will be available to the community through EPA's website and other, advertised locations.

THE WORKS APPROVAL AND EES PROCESS

Public participation is an important part of EPA's works approval process. You can make comments on works approval applications, which EPA will then take into consideration prior to making a determination on the application.

When it is received, EPA will advertise the application for the desalination plant works approval in statewide and locally distributed newspapers and on EPA's website.

DSE (the project proponent) has indicated it intends to jointly lodge the EES and works approval application. If this occurs the works approval application will be advertised jointly with the EES. In these circumstances the process for making a submission on the works approval application and EES is also joint.

Any interested person can submit comments on the desalination plant works approval application within the consultation period following the application being advertised in the newspapers. In the event of joint advertisement with the EES, these comments should be submitted to the EES inquiry, including specific reference to the works approval application, within the period of EES exhibition.

At the conclusion of the EES process, the Minister for Planning's assessment report will be provided to EPA to inform its consideration of the works approval application. EPA will then determine whether to issue the works approval.

EPA'S ROLE AFTER THE WORKS APPROVAL

If granted, a works approval would permit the desalination plant and associated infrastructure to be constructed.

On completion of the works, an EPA licence will be required to operate the plant.



EPA'S MONITORING OF CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES

EPA staff will check and monitor the environmental performance of those building the plant, to verify that they are meeting their obligations to protect the environment.

This monitoring may take many forms, including pre-planned and unannounced inspections of construction works by EPA officers, as well as scientific measurement of air, water and noise quality against EPA standards.

EPA will also respond to and investigate concerns reported by the community to EPA's Pollution Watch Line (9695 2777).

WHO CAN YOU SPEAK TO?

Queries relating to the reasons why the desalination plant is being built, its construction and operation should be directed to the Department of Sustainability and Environment Customer Services Centre on 136 186 or via its website at www.ourwater.vic.gov.au.

Information on the EES process can be found at the Department of Planning and Community Development's website at www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/planning/ees. Queries relating to the EES process may be directed to the Department's Environment Assessment Unit on (03) 9637 9624.

Queries relating to EPA's involvement in the desalination plant project or requests for further information from EPA should be directed to:

EPA Victoria Information Centre
Herald & Weekly Times Tower
40 City Road
Southbank Victoria 3001
Ph: (03) 9695 2722
Fax: (03) 9695 2710

or visit EPA's website at www.epa.vic.gov.au.