



Australian Government Initiative

WATER QUALITY
AUSTRALIA

Design and requirements for a new guideline

National Water Quality Management Strategy

2018

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1 Purpose of this document

This document provides an overview of the requirements for a new guideline to be approved under the National Water Quality Management Strategy (NWQMS). It has been developed to assist guideline proponents (a committee group, government body or organisation) that are proposing to develop a new guideline. This document applies to new guidelines developed by:

- the NWQMS governing committee (initially the Water Quality Policy Sub Committee, referred to here as the committee)
- third parties, such as another intergovernmental committee, a state or territory government, a local government, a regional or community group, an industry group or a business.

Some NWQMS guidelines may have other requirements for reviewing, updating and adding information (such as new guideline values). Please check the [NWQMS website](#) or the particular guideline for more information.

2 Introduction to the NWQMS and guidelines

The NWQMS aims to assist water resource managers to understand and improve water quality so that water is 'fit for purpose'—that is, suitable for current or desired values and uses and specific local conditions. Desired values are referred to as community values in the NWQMS and mean a value or use, such as safe water for drinking, recreation or livestock; a healthy environment; water for irrigation or industry; and water for cultural and spiritual values.

The NWQMS is designed to improve water quality and reduce pollution through providing a range of guiding documents and tools. The NWQMS supports the integration of water quality into water quantity planning. More information about the NWQMS, including the *National Water Quality Management Strategy: The charter*, which provides a glossary and more explanation about how the NWQMS works, is available on the [NWQMS website](#).

Guidelines under the NWQMS cover a range of subjects, including:

- protecting fresh and marine water ecosystems
- defining and managing safe drinking water
- defining water quality that is safe for recreational uses
- managing health and environment risks of recycled water use
- defining water that is safe for irrigation use, for livestock and for aquatic organisms that are used for human consumption)
- protecting groundwater.

3 Why include a new guideline under the NWQMS?

New guidelines could be included under the NWQMS to provide advice about water quality management and how the desired water quality might be achieved. The benefits of including a guideline under the NWQMS include:

- promoting a consistent, national approach to the management of significant water quality issues
- reducing duplication and inconsistencies, particularly when it comes to cross-border water resources
- providing the best available information and tools for use across Australia.

Water and environment government agencies work collaboratively to provide guidelines that form components of the NWQMS. There is scope for third parties such as other government committees/agencies, industry groups, local government councils/shires or regional natural resource management bodies to put forward a water quality guideline for inclusion under the NWQMS. If this information meets the specific requirements and the key principles outlined in this document (see the following sections for more information) then it may be approved for inclusion under the NWQMS.

If approved, the new guideline would be published on the NWQMS website. It would be allocated to one of three guideline categories, which are subject to different levels of oversight and maintenance. The categorisation is explained more fully in the following sections.

New guidelines should align with the Water Quality Management Framework, as this provides a useful process for managing water quality to achieve water that is fit for purpose.

4 Key principles to be met

To be included under the NWQMS, all guidelines should be based upon the best available information and meet the following principles:

- The guideline will:
 - play a fundamental role in the protection of the environment and/or human health
 - is required to manage risk for contentious and/or sensitive water quality issues and/or
 - fill a knowledge gap or emerging issue in water quality management that the committee considers is important to address.
- The water quality issue(s) the guideline will address is suited to nationally consistent management intervention.
- The guideline will address impacts on health, environmental, social, cultural and/or economic values.
- National guidance will help to harmonise the management of water resources, particularly cross-border and cross-catchment water bodies; reduce duplication; and contribute to achieving effective management and effective and efficient regulation.

The committee may also consider issues such as:

- any alternatives to a national guideline
- the risks and benefits of developing a new guideline
- any implementation implications from developing and maintaining a guideline
- the priority of developing a new guideline.

5 General requirements

A proponent of a new guideline is encouraged to approach the committee before commencing development to discuss the scope and ensure the new guideline meets the key principles. The proponent can then get the committee's advice on whether it is worthwhile proceeding with developing a new guideline.

A proponent of a new guideline will also need to:

- ensure that the committee is kept informed throughout the development process. This could be facilitated through a committee member being invited to become a member of a guideline steering committee or through regular communication with a committee contact who would advise other committee members through usual committee processes
- where relevant, ensure that the principles for incorporating cultural and spiritual values into water quality management are followed (see the [National Water Quality Management Strategy: The charter](#) for more details)
- have the information or results independently verified by a reviewer with suitable expertise and no conflict of interest (note that an independent review could be a peer review or multi-jurisdiction review)
- ensure that stakeholders who might be significantly impacted on by the new guideline (for example, if there is a recommendation to significantly change an industry operating practice) have an opportunity to comment on the draft guideline.

The steps involved in approving a new NWQMS guideline are as follows:

- the proponent approaches the committee with a proposal for a new guideline
- if the committee agrees that the proposed guideline will meet key principles, the proponent develops the guideline document to ensure it meets specific requirements
- the proponent or the committee verify the information by using a third party with suitable expertise and no vested interest
- the proponent submits the first draft to the committee for review; the proponent or committee undertakes consultation with key stakeholders
- the proponent submits the final draft guideline to the committee for approval
- the committee reviews the document and recommends either approval or additional information
- if approved, the guideline is categorised and published on the NWQMS website.

A flowchart outlining the process for developing a new guideline is at Attachment A, Figure 1.

6 Specific requirements

While meeting the key principles, a new guideline will also need to meet specific requirements depending on the type of information the new guideline will include.

There are two types of guidelines that could be incorporated into the NWQMS:

- guidelines that contain water quality guideline values
- guidelines to minimise the impacts on water quality from a process or activity—for example, intensive animal industries.

A guideline could contain guideline values and also address impacts from a process, in which case the guideline would need to meet both specific requirements.

6.1 Guidelines that contain water quality guideline values

These guidelines contain specific water quality guideline values that provide numerical or narrative water quality criteria to protect a community value. These values can assist guideline users to set objectives for water quality so that water will be fit for purpose.

A new guideline with this type of information will need to:

- outline why numerical or narrative water quality criteria (or guideline values) are required
- describe the community values that the guideline values are designed to protect (example values include water for the environment, drinking, recreation, primary industries, industry and Indigenous cultural and spiritual values)
- utilise transparent, verifiable methodologies to develop the guideline values
- base the guideline values on best available and fully referenced science
- specify the expected level or levels of protection that the guideline values will provide
- demonstrate that there is adequate, reasonably current data or information to justify the guideline values
- demonstrate how the guideline values can be tailored to suit local conditions or desired outcomes, if appropriate
- provide, where practicable and relevant, information about how the values can be integrated into water quality management and water allocation plans
- be designed so that guideline values are feasible to implement and monitor.

6.2 Guidelines to minimise the impacts on water quality from a process

These guidelines are designed to minimise the impacts on water quality from a human-induced process such as discharges from an industrial facility, stormwater run-off from a rural or urban catchment or using recycled water.

Information in these guidelines can assist users to identify what pressures and stressors the process may have on water quality and hence choose the appropriate mitigation actions. The information can be specific to an industry or apply more generally.

A new guideline with this type of information will need to:

- describe procedures that will assist users to identify and describe the likely pressures ([National Water Quality Management Strategy: The charter](#)) on applicable community value(s) related to water quality (for example, through the use of conceptual models)
- outline tools and techniques that can assist to identify and quantify the potential impacts on water quality associated with the users' process or processes
- provide information on current effective practices to manage and minimise the impacts
- be designed so that it can inform assessment of feasibility of approaches and actions to avoid or mitigate potential negative impacts.

7 Approval

A proponent of a new guideline would need to demonstrate that the requirements have been met before the guideline could be approved. To facilitate an effective and efficient approval process, proponents should contact the secretariat of the committee (in the first instance contact the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources—see contact details at the end of this document) early in the process.

As these guidelines are intended to address national water quality issues, all Australian, state and territory governments will need to approve the new guideline. Normally this occurs through the committee (initially the Water Quality Policy Sub Committee), which would either make the decision to approve a guideline or recommend that a higher authority (such as government ministers) approves a guideline. To make this decision or recommendation, the committee may take into account other considerations such as:

- government policy priorities
- the ongoing responsibility for the new guideline and the process for ongoing maintenance and review.

The committee may also ask the proponent for additional information or to undertake additional stakeholder consultation.

If the new guideline is approved, it will be published under the NWQMS. The committee will categorise the new guideline into one of the following categories:

- *Primary*—these guidelines are fundamental to the protection of environment and human health or manage risk for a critical issue. As these guidelines are top priority, they will need to be regularly updated and maintained.
- *Secondary*—these guidelines address issues important to managing water quality, such as a knowledge gap or emerging issue. The guidelines may be updated or retired or replaced over time by other guidance.

If a new guideline is not approved, it may be included on the NWQMS website under a third category called 'Reference Documents'. These documents provide information that is useful to water quality management but will not have committee oversight and will have a watermark stating these documents are for reference only and not endorsed by the committee.

A proponent may submit a document for inclusion in the Reference Document' category without having to go through the approval process for the primary and secondary guideline categories. It would be up to the committee to decide whether to include the document depending upon its relevance to contemporary water quality management and whether there are any risks to using it as a reference document (for example, if the information is misleading).

8 Review, update and maintenance

Information, tools and techniques can become out of date over time. A guideline may need to be updated when significant changes in the relevant science, expertise or information arise. The process, timing and funding arrangements for the review of a guideline should be addressed during its development phase. Some revision options could include the following:

- Guideline values will be reviewed no later than every five years and updated as required on a rolling revision schedule.
- A guideline will be reviewed and updated as necessary every five years unless there have been no significant changes in information, tools or techniques. A review page will be attached to the document indicating the date reviewed. If the document is not updated because there are no significant changes, it will be noted as not being required.

Minor maintenance may also need to occur—for example, minor editorial changes. The guideline owner may update the document for minor editorial amendments, on an as-needed basis, without the need to seek committee endorsement. Contact the Department of Agriculture and Water Resource for more information about what would be required.

9 Removing documents

The committee will undertake a brief review of guidelines at least once every five years. When a guideline no longer provides useful information relevant to a contemporary position on water quality management or has no benefit as a reference document, the committee may recommend that the document should be updated, re-categorised or removed from the NWQMS. If appropriate, the committee will provide recommendations to the organisation, body or group responsible for the guideline and discuss further actions to bring the guideline up to the requirements for inclusion under the NWQMS primary or secondary categories or it will be reclassified as a reference document. If these actions cannot be undertaken, the guideline will be removed from the NWQMS website.

10 More information

The NWQMS website has up-to-date information, including contacts, which can assist proponents who wish to develop a new guideline at (waterquality.gov.au). Alternatively, proponents can telephone the Department Agriculture and Water Resources on 1800 900 090.

The *National Water Quality Management Strategy: Standard operating procedure for guideline management* has information about the decision process for adding, reviewing, revising or retiring guidelines. It is available on the NWQMS website at waterquality.gov.au/about/standard-operating-procedures.

11 Attachment A

Figure 1 Process for approving a new NWQMS guideline

