

Water message goes down the plughole

By Claire Miller
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Victorians are remarkably ignorant about the state's water supply, and new research shows that the message about saving the nation's most precious resource is not getting through.

More than 20 per cent do not know where their tap water goes after it disappears down the plughole, and 10 per cent do not realise that it comes from rain and snow. And despite drought, climate change, dwindling reservoirs and millions spent on awareness campaigns, Victorians still have not grasped the seriousness of the water crisis.

The startling results are contained in a new survey on Victorian's knowledge of water issues.

Results show most Victorians are aware that not enough care is being taken with a precious resource, but few know much about even the most basic measures required if the state is to avoid running out of water within 10 years.

When asked the meaning of water efficiency, few could volunteer widely advertised initiatives. Six per cent nominated using washing machines and dishwashers with full loads, 5 per cent said installing rainwater tanks, 2 per cent volunteered low-flow shower heads or not hosing paths, and only 1 per cent suggested mulching gardens. About a third were convinced they had done everything possible to reduce their water consumption.

Answers were similarly varied when asked what else might be done to better manage water.

Only one in 10 nominated installing rainwater tanks, 6 per cent suggested encouraging grey-water recycling, and 2 per cent thought paths should not be hosed. No one suggested recycling treated water.

The survey was conducted in the first two weeks of March by Irving Saulwick, for Watermark Australia, a project of the Victorian Women's Trust. The project establishes a benchmark for measuring changes in attitudes, knowledge and behaviour. The next step will be a Waterwise campaign. Watermark's technical coordinator, Wayne Chamley, said the results showed consumers were listening, but still had a long way to go before they were "water literate".

He said the perception among more than three-quarters of respondents that the water companies were private was also counter-productive, because people perceived price rises as profit-driven rather than reflecting water's scarcity.

"Because we can turn on the tap and water comes out, we have been disconnected from what goes on," Mr Chamley said.

Mary Crooks, the trust's executive director and Watermark's project director, said people had not grasped the urgency of the crisis nor appreciated that serious changes would be required over the next decade.

"People are well intentioned, but they think if they have fixed a dripping tap, then they have done their bit," she said.

Although the State Government had put millions of dollars into awareness campaigns, "if it is not leading to behavioural change, then it is wasted money".

The superficial focus on dam levels did not make it clear that Melbourne would reach the limits of its capacity by 2015 if water consumption continued to rise as it did in the 1990s. "If people just hear the dams are up from 47 per cent to 54 per cent, there is a sense it is OK, but people are not looking beyond their quarter-acre block or apartment," Ms Crooks said.

Footnote: So where does tap water go when it goes down the plughole? Down drains for treatment at the Werribee or Cranbourne sewerage plants, and from there into either Port Phillip Bay or Bass Strait, at Gunnamatta. Stormwater drains feed into suburban creeks and eventually Western Port and Port Phillip bays.