

WATER TREATMENT OPERATOR CERTIFICATION – VICTORIAN AND NATIONAL PROJECTS REPORT



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ABSTRACT

In recognition of the importance that the training, experience and competence of water treatment operators has on the production of safe drinking water, in 2010 the Victorian Department of Health, members of the Victorian Water Industry Association (VicWater) and WIOA collaboratively released the “Victorian Framework for Water Treatment Operator Competencies - Best Practice Guidelines”.

The guidelines define minimum training, qualification and competency standards that operators must attain and maintain in order to operate drinking water treatment facilities in the State of Victoria. WIOA operates the only Department of Health endorsed Certification Scheme.

In 2011, the National Water Commission (NWC) provided funding through the Raising National Water Standards program to Government Skills Australia (GSA) for the development of a National Operator Certification Framework using the content of the Victorian Best Practice Guidelines as a base reference. Following extensive industry consultation throughout 2011 and 2012, a proposed Certification Framework and Report was delivered to NWC in March 2012.

In March 2013, the NWC presented two implementation options to the Water Industry Skills Taskforce (WIST) for consideration and the WIST asked for further investigation on an industry led approach. At the June 2013 Water Industry Skills Taskforce (WIST) meeting, the NWC confirmed that they were no longer able to manage the project. It was agreed that the WIST would become the interim Framework Owner and would work with industry to see the Framework implemented.

This paper briefly reports on the development and implementation of both the Victorian and National Certification processes.

1.0 VICTORIAN CERTIFICATION

1.1 Victorian Pilot Project

The “Victorian Framework for Water Treatment Operator Competencies - Best Practice Guidelines” requires all water treatment operators to be trained and those defined as “responsible persons” - those in charge of the operation of facilities, to also be certified.

As the endorsed Certifying body, WIOA’s role on behalf of the Victorian Department of Health is to ensure that all operators applying for certified status have the appropriate training and experience to match the type of systems they are operating. WIOA undertakes an independent assessment of the training and experience of each nominated water treatment operator and if deemed suitable, endorses them as being competent by awarding certified status under the scheme. Once certified, operators need to undertake a range of refresher and professional development activities to maintain their certified status.

To allow the requirements of the Best Practice Guidelines to be implemented, WIOA commenced a pilot of our Certification Scheme for water treatment Operators in Victoria in 2012.

The pilot was completed with the assistance of staff from Wannon Water and Veolia Water, Bendigo. As part of the Pilot, WIOA developed a matrix allowing water businesses to map their treatment plant process steps with the appropriate training Units from the National Water Package. In addition, a comprehensive suite of documentation was developed ensuring that only information that was vital for the certification process was collected to minimise the effort required by the water businesses. The documentation included process flowcharts, a variety of application forms and a website containing all the scheme information.

After trialling the skills verification system and all the documents with Veolia Water and Wannon Water staff, the process was completed for four operators. At a reception held at the Victorian Department of Health on Friday 14th December 2012, Broc Mulcair and Luke McCormick from Veolia Water along with Matthew Sinnott and Peter Umland from Wannon Water became the first four water treatment operators in Australia to be certified under the Water Industry Operators Association of Australia (WIOA) Water Industry Operator Certification Scheme.

The Victorian Chief Health Officer Dr Rosemary Lester assisted with the presentations and recognised that on a day to day basis, it is the water treatment operator who carries the responsibility for ensuring that raw water is treated to the required standard, that incidents that may compromise quality are detected and addressed, and that identified risks are adequately managed. The actions taken, or not taken, by a water treatment operator can have a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of the communities for which they undertake water treatment services.

Dr Lester acknowledged the important role that WIOA played in the development and implementation of the Guidelines and commented on the leadership shown to its members in recognising and prompting the importance that training and skill development plays in being an effective water treatment operator.

1.2 Victorian Scheme Implementation

On completing the Pilot, in January 2013 the WIOA Certification Scheme was made available to all water businesses and operators employed in water treatment in Victoria.

The Best Practice Guidelines and the WIOA Certification Scheme require water businesses to nominate one or more individuals to undertake the role of a “suitably qualified person”. WIOA can only process certification applications endorsed by these people. In Early 2013, WIOA contacted all the Victorian water businesses advising that the Scheme was now operational and requesting that they each nominate their representative/s. WIOA has received information from 10 Victorian water businesses indicating that they are now preparing to participate in the certification process.

Communicating with water businesses and operators has remained a high priority for WIOA. Information on the Scheme and its implementation has been provided at a variety of Victorian water industry events and through a number of face to face meetings with water business operations and Human Resources staff.

The aim of the meetings is to increase the level of understanding of the Scheme requirements within the industry.

An article was published in the December 2013 edition of AWA's Water Journal which discusses the implementation of the Victorian Framework for Water Treatment Operator Competencies, featuring case studies from Wannon Water and Veolia Water. The article includes perspectives from some of certified operators and from managers responsible for implementing operator certification.

To date there are 10 operators who have met all the requirements and have been certified and applications are being processed for another 39 operators. The 10 certified operators are responsible for operating a number of treatment systems. There are currently 14 systems that have certified operators and therefore are compliant with the requirements of the Best Practice Guidelines.

1.3 Victorian Re-Certification

The recertification process for the operators who have been certified has also commenced.

WIOA is again working closely with Veolia Water and Wannon Water to trial our recertification process and procedures. An individual Professional Development Register allowing training and development undertaken by each operator to be recorded, along with all the necessary forms to be complete to allow recertification is currently being trialled. It is important to ensure that the process has an appropriate amount of rigor, yet is not too cumbersome for the individuals and the water businesses.

After being awarded certified status, certified operators must undertake a range of professional development activities during the next 3 year period to be able to be recertified. To allow recertification, operators must demonstrate the following:

- Participation in the Mandatory Safe Drinking Water Issues Update Course
- Training for any new processes operated
- Accumulation of 15 Professional Development points in the preceding 3 year period, through a mixture of:
 - Accredited Training
 - Non-Accredited Training
 - Other Activities
 - Significant Workplace Project
 - Exceptional Activities
- Completion of a Workplace Evidence Report which contains:
 - Verification of Competence
 - Validation of Professional Development undertaken
 - Validation of Experience

Once all this information is confirmed by WIOA, the certified status of the operator is extended for an additional 3 year period.

2.0 NATIONAL CERTIFICATION

In 2011, the National Water Commission (NWC) provided funding through the Raising National Water Standards program to Government Skills Australia (GSA) for the development of a National Operator Certification Framework using the content of the Victorian Best Practice Guidelines as a base reference.

Following extensive industry consultation throughout 2011 and 2012, a proposed Certification Framework and Report was delivered to NWC in March 2012.

The aim of developing the national Certification Framework was to ensure that operators of potable water treatment facilities would have the requisite skills to undertake their work. This would be achieved by providing a set of nationally consistent criteria defining and recognising the minimum level of competency and capability required of operators who treat and/or sample drinking water for human consumption to ensure its safety.

In March 2013 the Water Industry Skills Taskforce (WIST) considered two implementation options presented by NWC for a national framework and asked for further investigation on an industry led approach. The NWC convened a workshop in May 2013 attended by water industry stakeholders to seek a preferred model and implementation pathway, and stakeholder commitment to actions.

At the June 2013 Water Industry Skills Taskforce (WIST) meeting, the NWC confirmed that they were no longer in a position to manage the project. It was agreed that the WIST would become the interim Framework Owner and would work with industry to see the Framework implemented. The NWC also presented the outcomes from the workshop and the WIST discussed the recommendations at length and supported maintaining momentum for this important water industry project.

WIST members agreed that:

- The National Certification Framework must be industry led.
- Close collaboration between state and territory regulators and water businesses is crucial to success.
- Minimum standards have been described in the Framework but strategies for implementation may vary across jurisdictions.
- WIST will take the lead by assuming the role of Framework Owner on an interim basis in order to maintain momentum.

WIST members are now playing a role to flesh out the steps required to implement a pilot of the National Certification Framework in both rural and urban water businesses. As it is well advanced, the existing Victorian Certification Scheme is providing useful information on implementation issues.

Pilot trials investigating all the issues associated with implementing the National scheme are now under way in NSW and Queensland. There are differences between the Victorian and National Frameworks and there are a number of challenges to work through before we see a fully implemented national scheme.

The Queensland pilot is being managed by the Queensland Water Directorate using the services of WIOA as the certifying body. In undertaking this role, WIOA has built on the work undertaken in Victoria and has developed the appropriate systems and processes to match the proposed National Certification Framework. It is likely that a number of operators in Queensland will be ready to be certified against the national Framework in mid-2014.

The AWA is managing a similar Pilot endorsed by the WIST in NSW.

WIOA is also assisting a number of NSW based water businesses in reviewing their current training and competency situation in relation to the requirements of the National Framework.