



# Utilities and Reservoir Reserves: Preparedness for public access



## How can utilities manage requests for public access to drinking water reservoir reserves?

The key to successfully managing requests to allow public access to drinking water reservoir reserves is being informed and prepared, to support community consultation and to develop balanced planning and policy positions.

### Before access has been requested

It is never too early to begin preparing for access requests! Even if there is no official pursuit of access to a reservoir reserve by either elected officials or the community currently, requests for access can come through various channels and at any time and it is best to be prepared in advance.

Establishment of a **clear policy position**, completing **preliminary investigations** and **initiating or further developing education** are all activities which can help utilities be best prepared for requests.

#### Clear Policy Position

A clear policy position, ideally set at Board or Executive level within an organisation, is vital.

Utilities need to **define** and **state** their policy on the use of drinking water reservoir reserves for recreational purposes. This policy should be broadly communicated publicly — and also internally throughout an organisation — providing a transparent, documented means of demonstrating an organisations’ stance, while also ensuring responses to requests remain consistent across an organisation.

A utilities’ policy should clearly state:

- **The position** – either no recreational use, or different levels of use for different zones, catchments and reservoirs. These selective access arrangements may take many different forms.
- **The key principles** of drinking water safety, as detailed in the *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines*, costs associated with different levels of public access, and benefits and risks associated with changes in management.
- **The reasoning** behind the position, in relation to the key principles and a risk-based approach – for example, ‘No Public Access’ may be determined for some smaller reservoirs, or areas too close to the treatment plant offtake in larger reservoirs, where contaminants introduced by recreation are difficult to mitigate. These reservoirs may be the last natural buffer before treatment with a buffering capacity too limited to allow recreational use.



Be prepared before, during and after recreational access has been requested:

- define a clear policy position
- undertake preliminary investigations
- understand community views
- educate communities
- take a long-term approach

#### Preliminary investigations

Completing preliminary investigations is another activity which utilities can undertake to ensure preparedness for access requests.

Utilities need to **investigate**:

- **Who are the stakeholders involved in the decision making?**  
Decision-makers should be aware of all stakeholders involved - including those who affect or are affected by a decision or action. Generating information on “relevant actors” to understand their behaviours, interests, agendas and influence, will provide valuable insight for communication and negotiations.
- **What nature-based recreational opportunities already exist in the region?**  
Decision-makers should consider the supply, demand and flow dynamic of regional recreational experiences when they assess new proposals. Utilities should also gather information on the carrying capacity and the vulnerability of the existing sites to achieving recreational activities whilst maintaining their social-ecosystem values. This information should be compared with similar assessments from reservoir reserve sites.
- **What is the overall value of the reservoir reserve aside from its value as a barrier in the water treatment process (i.e. the ecological, biodiversity, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other cultural/heritage value, and the value of the reservoir itself)?**  
In addition — in order to take a truly inclusive and transparent, multidisciplinary approach — community perspectives, commercial interests and advocacy groups promoting public access and the needs of other stakeholders should be considered.

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## • Why is this information necessary?

Gathering this type of important information provides an evidence base to underpin an organisation's position on public access – particularly if that position favours conservation of the area. It is also important to note that it can take many months to gather information about stakeholders, biodiversity or heritage values. Taking time to assess the value of the reservoir reserve in advance allows for expedient responses to requests while also fulfilling regulatory requirements on the management of key land resources.

## • What is the capacity of the reservoir reserve to absorb impacts from public access?

Public access poses many potential impacts on reservoir reserves, that should ideally be avoided, or minimised. To understand the reservoir reserve's capacity to absorb potential impacts requires thorough thought and numerous questions need to be addressed. For example, will there be increased potential for pollution? If so, should these impacts be avoided, or alternatively, what is the maximum level of pollution which could be managed by dilution before upgrades in treatments would be necessary? How much extra erosion could be controlled before having to introduce increased filtration and, realistically, how would this be predicted, policed and controlled? Who would be responsible for these costs?

## Initiating or further developing education

Education is also a vital step in preparing to respond to requests for access. Organisations must work to educate both themselves and their communities.

Utilities need to **educate**:

- **Themselves** — Understanding the needs and wants of various stakeholders and community groups is vital for organisations. Each community groups' view may be quite unique with demands which are not uniform. Viewpoints can range from:
  - groups who want access to reservoir reserves for a range of activities – such as educational and conservation efforts, recreational activities including horse riding, adventure racing, kayaking, fishing and power boat sports;
  - groups who do not want public access; or
  - groups with a specific point of view, for example a group with a desire for access but for reservoirs to have “wilderness” or “natural setting” spaces with facilities that are not overly engineered or constrained by handrails, barriers and signage.

Seeking input from such diverse groups (some of whom may be less vocal) about their values and motivations helps utilities understand the potential uses of reservoir reserves and associated benefits or disadvantages. Viewpoints and any requests which may be received in the future need careful consideration and to be evaluated based on quantitative data using standard assessment methods.

- **Their Communities** – the role that source protection plays in water treatment is vital for drinking water consumers and communities to understand. Community groups often do not realise that their actions can play a role in either delivering clean drinking water or contributing to the contamination of reservoirs. Ensuring the general public are well informed on source water protection and water treatment processes including concepts of risk management, multiple barriers and different types of water treatment (and their associated costs) helps utilities minimise risk to a reservoir reserve and achieve community understanding.

## During access negotiations

Often recreational proposals to gain access or modify access conditions to reservoir reserves will occur during negotiations. It is vital that utilities educate communities and elected officials on source water protection. Often drinking water reservoir reserves are the only location left untouched by development, agriculture or forestry. As society adapts to urbanisation, changing climate and lifestyles, the community will increasingly want access to these natural open spaces.

When negotiating the possibility of access with elected officials and community representatives, utilities should use specific information collected during the preliminary investigations, focusing primarily on:

- The overall value of the reservoir reserve – the water quality value, the ecological and biodiversity value, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other cultural/heritage value.
- Demonstrating any impacts on water treatment expenditure. For instance, if preliminary investigations determined that water pollution would increase the treatment required would also increase exponentially as would the cost. If this is the case, it is vital organisations provide sufficient financial information on the cost of additional treatment requirements, in addition to recreational management costs.
- Explore alternative existing facilities available within the region with elected officials and community groups. Often, it is more financially viable and sustainable to upgrade existing regional recreation areas and facilities rather than developing new recreational areas at reservoir reserve and allowing access.
- Constraints and conditions where access to the reserves may no longer be permitted to the community. For example, in drier times access would be prohibited if there is risk of fire or the reservoir has been drawn down resulting in boat ramps not reaching the water. Constraints may also be needed to ensure safe public access.

## After the decision

If access is denied, water utilities will need to justify their position. This will be made easier if stakeholders have been brought along during the process. Recreation in non-drinking water catchments can be supported, aligning with community needs, while protecting drinking water catchments that may be more vulnerable.

Alternatively, should access to a reservoir reserve be granted, it is critical to minimize any risks associated with recreational access, both now and in the future.

A long-term approach is the key to safeguarding the reservoir reserve, therefore it is vital that utilities:

- invest in long-term recreation management, including future financial and operational implications
- implement sustainable constraints and conditions to recreational access which accommodates future requests for extended access conditions, and
- actively and continually communicate and educate communities on operational constraints and access conditions including acceptable access times, behaviours and activities.