An overview of the Aquifer Interference Policy

August 2013

The NSW Aquifer Interference Policy was released in September 2012 and applies across the State. It explains the water licensing and impact assessment processes for aquifer interference activities under the Water Management Act 2000 and other relevant legislation.

There are three key parts to the policy:
1. All water taken must be properly accounted for.
2. The activity must address minimal impact considerations for impacts on water table, water pressure and water quality.
3. Planning for measures in the event that the actual impacts are greater than predicted, including making sure that there is sufficient monitoring in place.

Water licensing

Water licences are required to account for the water taken from groundwater and surface water sources through aquifer interference activities. This is to ensure that the amount of water taken from each water source does not exceed the extraction limit set in a water sharing plan. These extraction limits are set to ensure that water is available in each water source for the environment and other water users, including domestic and stock users, irrigators, town water suppliers and various industries – including mining and coal seam gas.

A water licence is required whether water is taken for consumptive use e.g. irrigation, or whether it is taken incidentally by the aquifer interference activity. For example, dewatering of groundwater to allow mining to occur or during building construction requires a water licence even where that water is not being used consumptively as part of the activity’s operation.

Assessment of water impacts

The Aquifer Interference Policy details the way the NSW Office of Water will assess aquifer interference projects to determine their potential impacts on water resources. It also explains the information and modelling that proponents will need to provide to enable the impacts to be assessed.

The assessment criteria are called ‘minimal impact considerations’ and include impacts on water table levels, water pressure levels and water quality in different types of groundwater systems. Impacts on connected alluvial aquifers and surface water systems are also considered, as well as the impacts on other water-dependent assets. These include impacts on water supply bores, groundwater-dependent ecosystems and culturally significant sites that are groundwater-dependent.

Thresholds are set in the Policy so that the impacts of both an individual activity and the cumulative impacts of a number of activities within each water source can be considered.
Role of the Minister for Primary Industries

When an assessment has been done, the NSW Office of Water or the Minister for Primary Industries will provide advice to the Gateway Panel, the Department of Planning and Infrastructure or the Division of Resources and Energy, depending on the phase or location of the project.

Gateway panel

The gateway process will involve a panel which is intended to provide a tailored mechanism to assess the potential impacts of these proposals on strategic agricultural land and resources. It will provide a rigorous and independent assessment of the potential impacts of a project on agricultural land and water resources before a development application can be lodged.

Benefits to NSW

Both the community and project proponents now have a better understanding of the detailed considerations in the assessment of the water-related impacts of each project. The assessment of potential impacts on water resources is occurring with greater clarity and transparency than in the past.

More information

www.water.nsw.gov.au

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