

## SEPTIC TANK EFFLUENT DISPOSAL SCHEMES (STEDS)

### 1. BACKGROUND

This report outlines the continuing and pleasing progress in the implementation of the STEDS reform program which is being lead by the STEDS Advisory Committee (SAC), which is hosted by the LGA and is comprised of representatives of State and Local Government. At the April meeting of the Forum, a detailed presentation on the reform program was provided by Richard Crabb, Executive Officer to the Committee.

### 2. ACTIVITIES SINCE THE APRIL MEETING

#### 2.1 Regional Forums

As foreshadowed at the April Forum meeting, regional STEDS Reform Forums were conducted during April and May in each country Local Government region at Naracoorte, Mt. Barker, Karoonda, Wudinna and Jamestown.

The Forums were very well received and attended by 140 councillors and staff from all 42 "STEDS councils" in the State. Presentations from five speakers (from Local and State Government and the private sector) provided attendees with an overview of the issues with STEDS and promoted a way forward for improved operation and management. A comprehensive "STEDS Information Package" containing fact sheets on STEDS operation and management was provided to all attendees.

#### 2.2 STEDS Reform Implementation Plan

The SAC has adopted an implementation plan which will assist councils to continue to embrace reform measures. Councils have been recently offered the Implementation Package through their five country regional organisations. The regional approach to reform demonstrates a willingness by councils to work together.

A major feature of the implementation program is a proposal to encourage all councils to complete a comprehensive audit of **all STED schemes** in their area. Forum members may recall that the SAC subsidised an audit of one STEDS in each Council area in December 2004 – January 2005. The results of these audits proved to be a powerful tool in promoting the STEDS reform message and providing practical and realistic information to councils to assist with future planning. The SAC has therefore decided to encourage all councils, through their regional associations, to extend the audit to all council operated STEDS across the State with some funding assistance from the SAC (including funding support from the Minister's Local Government Forum projects allocation).

The regional approach is expected to bring considerable savings for the remaining audit program which plans to see all the un-audited schemes in the State being audited by the end of 2005.

In addition to the audit of schemes the SAC is offering to councils:

- generic management plans and maintenance specifications;
- operation and maintenance workshops;
- a statewide STEDS operator reference group;
- advice to individual councils.

### **2.3 New STED Scheme demand**

Councils have been recently invited to register an interest for new STED schemes for towns where they believe a demonstrated need exists. The assessment criteria for an area to be eligible to be considered for a new scheme includes:

- public health;
- environment protection;
- regional and economic development;
- social and community demand; and,
- economic viability (i.e. no satisfactory, cost effective alternative to STEDS).

The initial response has produced a preliminary list of 40 STED schemes in 23 Councils.

At the June meeting of the STEDS Advisory Committee a small working party was established with specialist representatives to review the assessment criteria and prepare a priority list of STEDS demand. The working party will include representatives from the Department of Health (DH), Environment Protection Authority (EPA), Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation (DWLBC) as well as Local Government representatives. It is expected that this work will be completed by August 2005 to enable the recommendations to then be formally considered by State and Local Government.

### **2.4 Aggregation of STED schemes**

The Central Local Government Region, with financial support from the SAC, has almost concluded an aggregation feasibility study in the region. The study also examined opportunities for private sector involvement in the management and operation of schemes. While this study report is still in draft form, it is clear that aggregated management of schemes and the establishment of a regional or state-wide STEDS entity will bring efficiencies, consistency and compliance to the management and operation of STED schemes.

The SAC has commenced initial investigation into the legal framework and structural/organisational options for the aggregated management of existing and possible new STEDS, including options for the involvement of the wastewater utility companies.

## **2.5 STEDS Re-use schemes**

A significant opportunity exists for a joint Commonwealth/State/Local Government partnership under the *Australian Government Water Fund* to replace the older STEDS oxidation/evaporation lagoons with wastewater treatment plants to enable wastewater to be re-used, preferably in substitution for potable water (in many cases reducing the demand on the River Murray).

The older form of treatment and disposal struggles to meet the current environmental requirements and present day community expectations and needs replacement with modern technology. Where an irrigation re-use scheme (school or town oval, parks, golf course) can be incorporated with the upgrade and replace the use of existing water sources, then a significant dual benefit would result.

Investigation into a possible STEDS upgrading and effluent re-use package has commenced with a view to an application to the Commonwealth Government for funding assistance. Councils would still be required to make a significant financial contribution.

This is an exciting concept but will require significant financial resources and the involvement of multiple agencies.

## **2.6 State Government Policy and Funding post June 2006**

The current funding agreement between the State Government and the LGA (approximately \$3 million pa subsidy) expires in June 2006. The Government is yet to consider its long-term policy position in relation to STEDS, awaiting some of the key outcomes from the SAC and the STEDS Reform program (including the significant issue of the quantification of the legitimate demand for new schemes).

A draft State Government policy statement has been prepared and discussed with agencies at the officer level (the STEDS Reference Group<sup>1</sup>). When the work on the priorities and estimated cost of the demand for new schemes is completed, the draft policy statement will be finalised and forwarded to the Minister for State/Local Government Relations for consideration.

It is planned that further information will be available at the next Forum meeting with the expectation of putting a formal proposal to State and Local Government in Spring 2005.

## **3 SUMMARY - NEXT MEETING**

As can be seen from the rate of recent development with STEDS, the next Forum meeting is scheduled to be a “milestone meeting”, expected to bring together most of the outcomes of the STEDS reform program, together with a proposal for a clear policy position and robust financial and operational arrangements for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Includes representatives of DH, EPA, DWLBC, Department of Treasury & Finance, Office of Regional Affairs, OLG (and SA Water as appropriate).

## Recommendations

That the Minister's Local Government Forum:

- 1 Note the activities of the STEDS Advisory Committee (SAC) since the April meeting of the Forum;
- 2 Support the proposal to conduct an audit of all council operated STEDS in the State and encourage all councils to participate;
- 3 Request the SAC to provide a revised priority list of legitimate demand for new STEDS (including cost estimates) by the next meeting;
- 4 Request the SAC to report to the Forum before the end of 2005 on the measures necessary to support the aggregated management of STEDS on a regional or statewide basis, including possible legislative change;
- 5 Support the proposal to investigate upgrading existing STEDS to provide for re-use of wastewater including a possible application to the *Australian Government Water Fund*;
- 6 Note the intention of the State Government agencies to finalise a proposed policy statement for STEDS for the Minister for State/Local Government Relations, and a subsequent report to the Forum.