



H2OK - Making a Difference

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H2OK is the largest behaviour change project attempted in the ACT and region about stormwater. It is jointly funded by the ACT and Australian governments and is the community engagement component to the Healthy Waterways program, which also includes construction of stormwater infrastructure and improving our knowledge of stormwater treatment processes. Healthy Waterways aims to help improve the quality of water entering ACT and region lakes and waterways and flowing downstream to the Murrumbidgee River. It operates across jurisdictions in the Upper Murrumbidgee catchment auspiced by the ACT and Region Catchment Management Coordination Group.

A survey of households in the area was conducted in 2015 around water quality and recreational use of our waterways. This survey generated 4700 responses, from which it was evident that the lakes and waterways were being used for many different things like boating, fishing, birdwatching, picnicking, cycling and walking. It also indicated a significant lack of stormwater literacy. While people enjoyed using waterways they did not associate stormwater drains and what goes down them with the quality of their waterways. From this information it was decided the target audiences for the H2OK program were urban residents, rural residential dwellers and the building, construction and maintenance industries. The project also took advice from successful stormwater education programs around the world.

The main elements of the program are a region wide seasonal multimedia campaign; demonstration sites; community art; event engagements; training and workshops and ambassadors, all delivered under the banner of H2OK Keeping our Waterways Healthy supported by striking collateral with strong messaging.

H2OK has the ambitious aim of raising awareness and understanding of stormwater, where it goes, what pollutes it and how everyone can play a part in keeping our stormwater clean by encouraging an adoption of positive behaviours about catchment protection. Building regional partnerships between governments and with community and industry is a key success factor for the project.

Drain art developed by students and local artists as well as drain stencils have been installed in high foot traffic areas across the region. These direct visual reminders of the connection to waterways have been successful in engaging the general public. Demonstration sites on rural and urban residences properties, at building sites and in community gardens are providing real examples for others to follow and learn from. Seasonal media campaigns provide a focus on topical issues like autumn leaf fall or summer storms. Community engagement events like the Canberra Multicultural Festival or agricultural shows provide an opportunity to engage with a wide audience. School and community group activities also provide an avenue for getting the message out. Collateral such as posters, magnets, fact sheets and stickers support these engagements.

The question is are we really making a difference? It remains to be seen. We have a large target audience (500,000 people). Our project only runs for three years until June 2019. We are at the halfway mark. We have thought a lot about evaluation. We are confident that our program is raising awareness of what stormwater is, where it goes and what pollutes it. The question is to what extent and how effective were the key communication messages in driving behavioural change? What reach has our program had to our target audiences and will the water quality in our waterways be improved?

We are also conscious of how difficult it is to differentiate impacts from our program from others. We will collate activity data and repeat elements of the earlier survey. The project needs to continue to run for many more years to make a real impact. What we can discern as this project runs through to its conclusion is whether we are steering the right course. It was always seen as a pilot in multi-jurisdictional project delivery. We have built stronger connections and we are confident they will mean a healthier catchment in the longer term.