

Water projects 'not needed'

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- [Projects delayed As cities wilt, most major water projects are delayed](#)

THE controversial \$750 million north-south pipeline is unnecessary and the desalination plant could have been avoided with greater efforts to cut water use, according to top-level advice delivered to the State Government just weeks before both projects were announced.

The advice was contained in a secret, cabinet-commissioned water plan delivered to ministers early in June 2007.

Two weeks later, the Government revealed its \$4.9 billion water plan, including the Wonthaggi desalination plant and north-south pipeline.

The Sunday Age obtained a copy of the alternative plan and revealed its existence last month, but the Government refused to release the document.

The report, *Review of Victorian Water Supply-Demand: Options and Risks*, also told the Government that Crib Point, near Hastings, would be the cheapest place for a desalination plant.

The \$295,000 review of the city's water crisis, by policy strategist ACIL Tasman, recommended a big boost to Government programs to cut water use in homes and businesses instead of the controversial projects.

The report showed that, in the five years to 2012, these savings programs, including a plan to send qualified plumbers out to homes to replace inefficient shower heads and taps, could save 74 billion litres — close to what the Government says the north-south pipe will deliver annually.

The analysis also said the north-south pipeline could not be relied on if winter rain continued to fail in northern Victoria. There was little winter rain in 2007 and 2008.

This underscores recent reports that Victoria's top water officials are preparing for the pipeline to deliver much less water than promised because of the drought.

"Clearly (a north-south connection) requires a return to some wetter years — the strategy is just not available for the immediate drought response strategy," the report said. "Under the worst-case scenario modelling, the pipeline is not needed for many years — by which time other strategies may well have emerged as more cost-effective."

If the water crisis deepened, the consultants suggested going to level 4 restrictions and "rationing" water to 130 litres a day for each person. This would save about 30 to 36 billion litres a year. Other recommendations include:

? Rather than commissioning a desalination plant, the Government gets ready to build one, finalising a site, design and business case. "The likelihood of needing to build ... in the short term appears modest," the report says. A similar "readiness" approach is recommended for the north-south pipeline, where Melbourne "reserves" water in northern dams but does not actually build the pipe.

?Recycled water for drinking should get "serious consideration". Sewage from the Eastern Treatment Plant could be treated to produce high-quality drinking water then "shandied" at Cardinia reservoir with fresh water. The consultants admit this would require a large public education campaign.

?Accelerating water efficiency programs, including better deals for water-efficient washing machines. After 2012 these programs would save 59 billion litres every year compared with the Government's current plans, which will save 29 billion litres a year.

If these measures "bite hard enough" the readiness strategies could be deferred indefinitely, the analysis said.

The Government stressed that the report was just one ingredient in its water plan and that ACIL Tasman had underestimated the lack of rain of the past few years.

The Sunday Age asked Water Minister Tim Holding a series of questions about the report, including why the Government did not follow the north-south pipeline advice and why water-saving projects were not ramped up. But the questions were ignored and only one response supplied.

"Thankfully we didn't adopt this report," the minister's spokesman Luke Enright said. "I think it is ironic that, as we go under the old stage 4 four trigger level, you are going to write another story saying we acted too quickly by investing in the major water projects that we did."

Melbourne's water storages were 29.4 per cent full yesterday, the lowest ever for this time of year. Last week the city's residents each used 152 litres a day, just under the Government's target of 155 litres. Melbourne remains on stage 3a restrictions.

Opposition urban water spokeswoman Louise Asher said the report showed the Liberal Party and the Nationals were right to question the validity of the north-south pipeline. "The most damning aspect of this report is that it shows the Government's complete neglect of water as an issue prior to the 2006 election," she said.

Plug the Pipe member Chris Harrison said the report showed how illogical it was to connect the wetter catchment of Melbourne to the drier one of Eildon.

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