

## **Inquiry into scrap metal theft**

**Submission No:** 5  
**Submitted by:** The Queensland Water Directorate  
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## SUBMISSION

19 September 2023

Committee Secretary  
Transport and Resources Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
Brisbane Qld 4000

Email: [trc@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:trc@parliament.qld.gov.au)

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Transport and Resources Committee Inquiry into Scrap Metal Theft**

The Queensland Water Directorate (*qldwater*) is the central advisory and advocacy body within Queensland's urban water industry, working with our members to provide safe, secure and sustainable urban water services (drinking water, sewerage and wastewater treatment) to Queensland communities.

In providing these essential services, the urban water sector own and operate sewer lines, water and wastewater treatment plants, pumping stations, reservoirs, and a range of other water technologies/ infrastructure.

There are currently 370 water supply schemes and 265 sewage schemes ranging from large-scale infrastructure in South-East Queensland (SEQ), to facilities in regional and remote Queensland (including those servicing island communities).

The Queensland sector is comprised of 75 service providers directly employing nearly 7,000 people. Of the 75 publicly owned water service providers, 66 are local councils outside of SEQ, 15 of these are Aboriginal councils and two are Torres Strait Island councils.

*qldwater* members include councils, the council owned statutory authorities in south-east Queensland (Urban Utilities and Unitywater) and the two state-government owned statutory authorities (Gladstone and Mt. Isa Water Boards).

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Transport and Resources Committee on the Inquiry into Scrap Metal Theft. *qldwater* provides this submission without prejudice to any submissions from our members or other urban water providers.

## **Background**

On 24 August 2023, the Legislative Assembly agreed to a motion that the Transport and Resources Committee inquire into and report on scrap metal theft, with the following terms of reference:

*That the Transport and Resources Committee (the Committee) inquire into and report to the Legislative Assembly by 24 November 2023 on scrap metal theft in Queensland and in doing so consider:*

- 1. the types of metal at risk of being stolen and resold as scrap, taking into consideration copper, precious, and other metals, and vehicle parts;*
- 2. how the scrap metal market operates, including the supply chain and payment methods;*
- 3. the prevalence of scrap metal theft in Queensland;*
- 4. the direct and indirect impacts of scrap metal theft on Queenslanders, such as costs, disruption, and essential service delivery;*
- 5. direct and indirect risks to worker and community safety, as well as other risks such as environmental harm;*
- 6. the effectiveness of the existing Queensland laws and approach in preventing, investigating and prosecuting scrap metal theft in Queensland;*
- 7. a recommended contemporary legislative, regulatory and enforcement framework for deterring, detecting and disrupting scrap metal theft which is informed by national and international approaches and experiences; and*
- 8. other non-regulatory measures, such as information sharing, education and public awareness raising, and technology solutions, which may assist in reducing the prevalence and impact of scrap metal theft in Queensland.*

**qldwater** suggests that the inquiry should be renamed as an Inquiry into Metal Theft and the Scrap Metal Industry. The metal being stolen from critical water infrastructure is not scrap. The metal provides an essential function until its unlawful removal and appropriation.

**qldwater's** submission will focus on the theft of metals and metal-containing assets from critical water service infrastructure and networks. We are unable to comment on 'scrap metal theft'.

## **The Role of the Urban Water Sector**

The role and functionality of urban water utilities has evolved, commencing with (safe) water supply, and then the provision of sewerage, drainage, environmental protection and, more recently, water security and reliability efforts.

Increasing pressures from climate change, population growth, urban densification and urban sprawl require water utilities and water service providers to adapt and innovate, to maintain service delivery standards. These pressures are contributing to a variety of challenges including water security and reliability concerns which, if not managed, will negatively impact community liveability, environmental flows and biodiversity, as well as economic prosperity.

The urban water sector is subject to the *Security of Critical Infrastructure Act 2018 (Cth) (SCI Act)* and some of our members manage obligated water assets. The *SCI Act* contains a range of powers, functions and obligations that only apply in relation to specific critical infrastructure assets across the electricity, gas, water and ports sectors.



For the purpose of the *SCI Act*, critical infrastructure refers to *critical water assets*, which is further defined as one or more systems or networks managed by a water utility where those systems or networks ultimately service more than 100,000 connections. This captures those critical water utilities, which if disrupted, would significantly impact the operations (and safety) of large population hubs, economic interests and Australian Government operations.

In May 2021, amendments made to the *SCI Act* widened the definition of critical water infrastructure beyond the 100,000 connections (sewer or water or both – see definition on page 26 and also Section 9). While under Part 2A of the *SCI Act*, Critical Infrastructure organisations were required to adopt a Critical Infrastructure Risk Management Program (CIRMP) by 17 August 2023. Numerous *qldwater* members are obligated entities and have submitted their programs.

***Metal Theft from the Sector***

*qldwater* members have reported a significant and growing number of thefts of metal components and infrastructure. It is noted that water and wastewater treatment facilities do not have significant volumes of copper water assets, despite perceptions constructed from domestic plumbing settings.

The majority of reported thefts for the water service industry, are linked to the removal of electrical components and infrastructure and, more recently, renewable energy technologies (solar photovoltaic panels and inverters).

Renewable energy power supplies are essential for some of our network assets, such as pump stations, and telecommunication and instrumental control, particularly where connection to traditional power supplies are not feasible or unduly costly. Remote infrastructure is particularly vulnerable to metal and component theft.

Damage to our critical infrastructure from the removal of metals and components may lead to water treatment and supply breaches which risks community safety; as well as posing a direct electrocution risk to water network personnel. The urban water sector also services homes with 'life support' functions where water is an essential input of ongoing home medical treatments (such as haemodialysis).

Smaller and regional councils in particular struggle with the costs (and supply chain issues) associated with the repurchase of stolen components and many do not have readily available access to skilled workers to repair and refit impacted infrastructure; while such thefts may impact the larger utilities compliance to the *SCI Act*.

*qldwater* welcomes the inquiry into the matter. The direct risks to community safety, worker safety and the increasing financial burden to the urban water sector (and our customers) must be addressed.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Yours faithfully



Dr Georgina Davis  
Chief Executive Officer