

Irrigation corporation operating licence technical referrals

This document outlines why and when the department may refer irrigation corporation (IC) operating licence matters to internal technical specialists.

Application and scope

Licensing assessing officers perform regulatory activities and assessments to identify trends, regional issues, emerging risks, improvement opportunities and matters for follow-up assessment, technical advice or regulatory action. These activities are undertaken in relation to:

- annual review of compliance with conditions of operating licences, water access licences, approvals and associated monitoring and reporting plans (M&R plans)
- review of monitoring and reporting plan requirements
- renewal or amendment of an operating licence.

While undertaking these activities, assessing officers occasionally refer matters to obtain specialist technical advice that will support compliance assessment, management of environmental risk and inform evidence-based decision making.

Annual compliance reviews

To comply with a condition of their operating licence, ICs must report to the department by 31 October each year. The report must include information required to be reported under a monitoring and reporting plan identified in the conditions, or as a condition of any licence or approval issued under the *Water Management Act 2000* and held by the IC. Assessing officers review these reports annually.

Review of monitoring and reporting plans

The department will review IC M&R plans in the 2026–2027 financial year to remove obsolete or irrelevant requirements and identify improvements. Proposed changes will be evidence-based and informed through consultation with ICs and relevant technical teams.

During the review, technical teams in the department's Water Group may be consulted to:

- scope extra monitoring and reporting that is necessary to identify, monitor and mitigate potential environmental impacts
- support related work programs including surface water and groundwater modelling, salinity management water planning and environmental watering.

Technical considerations that may prompt referral

Technical considerations that may prompt referral include:

- issues or recommendations arising from reviews of annual reports
- operational changes or risks identified during the licence term
- new or updated technical information, including monitoring results, modelling, investigations, or policy advice.

Technical assessment outputs may include recommendations, information about operational or regional context, monitoring data, modelling, expert reports or compliance findings that inform decisions, follow up compliance activities or future improvements.

Review or amendment of an operating licence

The department's regulatory services include review and amendment of IC operating licences to ensure licence conditions remain contemporary, enforceable, and aligned with water management objectives.

Assessments of proposed operating licence amendments integrate relevant legislative and policy requirements and draw on technical evidence, including information from previous annual reports and other regulatory activities.

Matters may be referred for specialist technical assessment such as in hydrology, ecology, water quality, hydrogeology, monitoring and metering, or data integrity. Referrals support transparent, consistent, and evidence-based assessment of proposed amendments and ensure changes are practical to implement.

Technical advice requested by irrigation corporations

Irrigation corporations may request specialist information or advice services from the department on a case-by-case basis. The department will consider the scope of the request and the expertise required.

These services are provided on a cost-recovery basis, charged at a daily rate.

What this document does not do

This document:

- does not introduce new regulatory requirements or approval conditions
- does not replace the conditions of operating licences, water licences, any approvals, or M&R plans
- does not remove the discretion of Licensing assessing officers to seek technical advice where warranted
- does not guarantee that referral will, or will not occur, in all circumstances where a referral trigger is identified.

Irrigation corporations will be consulted before referral to technical services

Technical referrals are considered on a case-by-case basis, and are dependent on the context, circumstances, available evidence, perceived level of risk and relevant legislative, licence or approval requirements.

Before referring a matter for technical input, the assessing officer will consult with the relevant IC to explain the basis for the technical referral and the output being sought.

ICs may provide additional information or data at this point, if it is agreed this could address the need of the technical referral. Timeframes to provide additional information will be agreed with the IC at this stage.

If the technical referral is to proceed, the assessing officer will provide a written estimate of the cost of the service, as advised by the technical team.

Technical referral triggers or thresholds

Table 1 sets out the triggers or threshold that may prompt referral, explains why technical referral is required and specifies which Water Group technical team the matter will be referred to.

Table 1: Technical referral triggers or thresholds

Issue area	Trigger / Threshold	Why referral is required	Water Group technical team
Groundwater recharge - Groundwater depth <2 m across reporting area - Anomalous or incomplete piezometer (depth to water level) data - New or changed groundwater mitigation measures	Sustained rising groundwater trends, anomalous trends or new/changed mitigation measures. Where reporting indicates non-operational piezometers in an area of concern.	To determine whether groundwater conditions indicate increased salinity risk, land degradation risk or ineffective mitigation/management measures, and whether existing controls remain appropriate under the approval.	Groundwater Management & Science
Salinity and salt load - Increase in salt export without explanation - Inconsistent or non-reconciling salt balances - New salinity mitigation/management strategies reported	Significant deviation from historical salt load trends. Where new/ changed mitigation/ management strategies have been identified as implemented. If related works/ infrastructure has been reported to be non-operational, decommissioned or operations are not consistent with operational plans/ conditions.	To assess downstream and basin-scale impacts, confirm calculation methods, and ensure consistency with Basin Salinity Management objectives.	Basin Salinity

Issue area	Trigger / Threshold	Why referral is required	Water Group technical team
New/ changed groundwater or salinity mitigation measures - New or changed from previous years' controls - Proposed modifications to salinity reporting obligation and mitigation strategies	New infrastructure or mitigation/management actions reported. Where new or changed management actions and mitigation strategies have been identified. Including where assessment activities rely on management actions/ infrastructure that has been reported as non-operational or decommissioned.	To evaluate whether measures are technically effective, evidence-based, and suitable to address identified risks.	Groundwater Management & Science / Basin Salinity
Trend analysis Trends lack credible explanation or mitigation/ management responses	Significant trends not aligned with climate, seasonality and water use.	To provide specialist interpretation of monitoring data, distinguish natural variability from variability caused by other factors, and determine whether mitigation/management responses are adequate.	Water Group / Operations / relevant specialist (case-by-case)
Data omissions or discrepancies - Repeated errors across reporting years - Unexplained discrepancies/ anomalies in datasets - Contradictory datasets	Missing, unexplained or unresolved datasets preventing full assessment.	To assess whether data gaps undermine compliance assurance, whether additional monitoring is required, or whether water licences or approvals, operating licence/M&R Plan conditions need strengthening.	Water Group / Operations / relevant specialist

Issue area	Trigger / Threshold	Why referral is required	Water Group technical team
Regulatory or strategic salinity risk Findings may affect approval conditions or regional salinity accounts	Recommendations from assessment of salinity impacts under Basin Salinity Management 2030. Recommendations may be changes to monitoring, or drive legislative, policy or other change.	To assess strategic salinity impacts beyond the IC and inform potential change/ amendments to M&R plans, water licences or approvals, operating licence conditions, policy, intergovernmental or other departmental change.	Basin Salinity / Water Policy / Water Group
Surface water modelling - Updates to model inputs, assumptions, scenarios, or calibration datasets - Changes to model version/ methodology or interpretation of model outputs for compliance reporting	Where proposed changes are likely to materially affect predicted surface water impacts, compliance assessments (including water take), or the monitoring/trigger framework.	To review and confirm that modelling approach, inputs, and outputs used in the water assessment review are technically robust and fit for purpose; and to confirm consistency with IC approval conditions for water take and associated M&R plan requirements including triggers, exceedance reporting, and adaptive management responses.	Surface Water Modelling / Hydrology
New/changed water quality measures (surface water) Water salinity and quality management	Any amendment/renewal involving water quality objectives, mixing/stratification considerations, salinity triggers, discharge/return flow rules, or changes to monitoring sites/frequency/analytes; exceedances or sustained trends in annual review of OLs.	To confirm that proposed monitoring and thresholds are fit-for-purpose, assess risks to receiving water and downstream water users, and ensure compliance with conditions can be assessed objectively.	Basin Salinity / Water Operations

Issue area	Trigger / Threshold	Why referral is required	Water Group technical team
Water accounting Hydrology, hydraulic performance and water accounting	Changes to diversion limits, flow targets, accounting rules, measurement methods, operational constraints, or infrastructure operations; new/updated hydrologic or hydraulic modelling; material discrepancies in reported volumes.	To verify modelling assumptions and results, assess impacts on water availability and downstream users, confirm measurement and accounting integrity, and ensure proposed conditions can technically be implemented and are auditable.	Water Operations / Hydrology
Metering and data Monitoring, metering and data integrity	Changes to metering infrastructure, telemetry, assurance methods, data handling, quality assurance, quality control, reporting formats, or audit approach; gaps or inconsistencies in datasets that support compliance determinations.	To confirm that data collection and reporting are accurate and reliable, that compliance can be assessed objectively, and that conditions are measurable and auditable across the licence term.	Water Operations / Hydrology