

Australasian Catchment Water Improvement Standard

Public Consultation Feedback Summary

18 July – 18 August 2025

Overall, respondents expressed strong support for establishing a nationally consistent water quality standard. Many noted that water quality challenges extend well beyond the Great Barrier Reef catchments and that a scalable, transparent framework is both timely and necessary. Stakeholders widely recognised that ACWIS provides a credible foundation for expanding water quality markets nationally, strengthening investor confidence, and unlocking new private sector investment into catchment restoration and natural capital initiatives. The expansion of a proven model into a broader Australasian context was seen as a logical and positive step.

There was also substantial support for allowing Water Improvement Credits to operate within both voluntary and compliance markets, provided environmental integrity is maintained. Respondents emphasised that regulatory clarity will be essential to ensure credits align with statutory water quality objectives and offset frameworks. Many noted that voluntary and compliance markets can operate in complementary ways to deepen market demand and accelerate environmental outcomes. At the same time, stakeholders stressed that strong safeguards must be in place to prevent double counting and to ensure credits represent genuine additional environmental benefit.

The proposed requirement to quantify pollutant reductions in kilograms received general support, with many stakeholders acknowledging that measurable, mass-based metrics promote transparency, consistency and comparability across projects. However, several respondents noted that highly dynamic landscapes may present monitoring challenges and that conversion factors between different pollutants should be grounded in strong scientific justification. Some submissions suggested that while mass-based metrics provide a robust foundation, supplementary approaches may be needed in the future to better recognise broader environmental and social co-benefits such as biodiversity enhancement, cultural outcomes and flood resilience.

The verification framework outlined in the draft Standard was widely regarded as essential to maintaining trust and credibility. Stakeholders supported independent

third-party verification as a cornerstone of market integrity. However, some respondents raised concerns about audit frequency and associated costs, particularly for smaller or community-based projects. Several submissions suggested that a risk-based or tiered assurance model could help balance rigour with accessibility while preserving confidence in credit quality. Ensuring that verifiers possess appropriate technical expertise was also highlighted as important to maintaining scientific credibility.

A number of potential barriers to participation were identified during consultation. Financial barriers such as upfront capital requirements, methodology development costs and verification expenses were commonly cited. Regulatory and administrative complexity, along with uncertainty regarding credit demand and cross-jurisdictional recognition, were also noted as potential constraints. Technical capacity and awareness outside established markets may further limit early uptake. Respondents recommended measures such as pilot projects, clear regulatory guidance, regional support structures and proportionate assurance pathways to support broader participation and market growth.

Respondents also reflected on the broader community and regional implications of ACWIS. Many highlighted the potential for new income streams for landholders, increased investment in regional catchments and expanded participation of First Nations communities when projects are co-designed and culturally appropriate. Others noted the importance of monitoring unintended socio-economic impacts, particularly in rural and remote communities. The importance of aligning ACWIS with regional natural resource management planning and existing regulatory frameworks was consistently emphasised.

Importantly, consultation revealed strong interest in active participation. Multiple stakeholders indicated interest in submitting methodologies, transitioning existing approaches into the ACWIS framework, becoming registered proponents and implementing pilot projects in priority catchments. While participation is often described as demand-driven and dependent on regulatory clarity, the overall response suggests meaningful market readiness and engagement across sectors.

In summary, the consultation process demonstrated strong support for establishing a nationally consistent, high-integrity water quality market framework. Stakeholders expressed confidence in ACWIS as a foundation for expanding water quality markets across Australia and New Zealand, while emphasising the need to balance scientific rigour with accessibility and inclusivity. Clear regulatory alignment, proportionate verification, transparent methodology governance and continued stakeholder engagement were identified as critical factors for successful implementation.