

28 March 2007
Mr T Fisher

Honourable Ministers, Members of Parliament, Advisors, Industry Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As stated in the opening address, it is only fair and reasonable that all communities who consume products having recognised health and safety aspects associated with them be thoroughly independently assessed for their “fitness for purpose”.

It is however unreasonable to expect consumers to make an informed decision when the main tenants of this philosophy are ignored!

This is the current position that we as a community are left with, now that the Water Efficiency Labelling Scheme has come into effect.

WELS was deemed to be an appropriate policy response to the aim of reducing urban water consumption and conserving national water supplies.

Two key goals were set:

- To enable consumers to choose water efficient products with full confidence that their performance would not be compromised.
- To encourage manufacturers to further innovate in the development of effective water-use and water – saving technology.

State Regulators and Industry wholeheartedly supported the implementation of the WELS program and have heavily invested countless man- hours through the provision of technical writing and support, access to Research &Development and testing facilities, test methodology development, along with significant WELS awareness seminars held by individual companies across Australia, with one key objective in mind –

To build confidence in and maintain the integrity of the WELS label on WELS products!

The accuracy and consistency of water efficiency claims made by the suppliers of WELS products, combined with their “fitness for purpose”, was conceded in principle by all parties to be best managed through Australian Product Standards development, and the Watermark Product Compliance Program.

After all, this was the most logical and most cost effective method in the implementation of such a self funded program as WELS, as it would allow the independent audit and management of water efficiency claims by accredited Certifying Assessment Bodies, ensure a level playing field for industry participants and allow confidence to be built into the WELS label.

For two years, numerous Australian Standards Committees were charged with writing, assessing and incorporating into the relevant Australian Product Standards, performance methodologies for water efficiency claims that WELS products would be assessed and registered against!

It was not until the 11th hour that industry was to find out that this was not how the WELS Regulator was proceeding.

Unfortunately, it is extremely disappointing that two key objectives of the WELS Scheme which is clearly identified as a joint Government and Industry initiative, and that had been agreed upon between the State Regulators, Industry and the Federal WELS Regulator were lost in the process between agreement and legislative drafting!

As a direct result we are now seeing numerous WELS labelled products that you and I as consumers, along with hundreds of thousands of your constituents, may purchase without the knowledge and identification that there may be health and safety issues attached to their installation and or use.

Further, consumers and State Regulators now face the reality that many existing WELS labelled products may not be legally connected to regulated drinking water supplies throughout Australia. A recent WELS registered and labelled product independently purchased was found to state that it was not suitable for connection to the drinking water supply because of its material content! This product intended use was in food preparation areas!

Additionally, current radio advertising on drive time urges owners and developers of motels and hotels to purchase a specific brand of the most water efficient shower heads available on the market today. It does however fail to advise the consumer either through this medium or clearly on the company's website that these products in fact carry a WELS Zero Star Rating and Water Warning Label.

Finally we are now seeing in excess of an estimated \$500,000 in subsidies that have been provided to consumers by Water Utilities for the purchase of WELS labelled washer / dryer combination units, unaware that significantly more water is used during the drying function than what is actually saved during the washing cycle.

Is this how we build consumer and market confidence in such an important label as WELS?

Industry now faces a complex and time - consuming process to seek a single change to WELS – that the Watermark is a prerequisite for listing in the WELS Scheme.

We have the opportunity with the collective support of Industry through the Plumbing Products Industry Group and the Plumbing Coalition of Australia represented here today, to seek the implementation of the WELS Scheme as first agreed!

A scheme that will deliver the very best that we, Governments and industry collectively can provide to the Australian community and allow an original key objective to be attained –

*To build confidence in and maintain the integrity of the
WELS label on WELS products!*

Stuart Henry MP, on behalf of the Prime Minister at the recent National Plumbing Regulators Forum held in Perth, delivered a message, which advised the Prime Minister wanted a “consistent, efficient and effective regulatory regime” to be available.

I urge you all to help us to achieve the same through the WELS process.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Hon Stuart Henry MP, who has been an enormous support to industry during both the conception and implementation of the WELS Scheme.

Thank you.