



AFL Victoria

Drought Response Paper

March 2007

Background

Based on the current level 3 water restrictions that are in place, football ground watering has been significantly reduced to the extent where some councils are watering only 1 in 4 grounds and other councils are not watering grounds at all. The impact at most grounds is that grounds have suffered damage to the grassed surface. The ground conditions that metropolitan Melbourne is experiencing at present have been experienced in rural Victoria for some years and we have learned, and will continue to learn, from their experience Councils in metropolitan Melbourne have ordered that no pre season or practice match activities take place on the grounds. Ground inspections will take place by council representatives on an ongoing basis with councils communicating to clubs when they are able to use their grounds. Most council's have instructed clubs to plan the usage of the grounds around competition games only.

It should also be noted that all grounds fall into the current non usage situation except for some elite stadiums and privately owned facilities such as private school grounds.

AFL Victoria has been represented at all council forums and seminars around Melbourne where all councils delivered a consistent message. At some council drought forums sports grounds agencies have commented on ground surfaces including preparation and retention and it should be noted that at this stage apart from the AFL a standard for ground hardness does not exist for grounds to be measured against.

We have summarized below some of the views and comments to alleviate some of the myths as well as provide a view from a community football perspective.

Summary of Views and Comments

Stage 3 water restrictions have resulted in 1 in 4 grounds being watered, albeit on a reduced basis from the watering program that takes place when there are no restrictions, and some council's are not watering ovals at all. However, most experts such as South East Water, predict that Stage 4 water restrictions will be in place in April/May which will mean that under those restrictions no sporting ovals can be watered.

VicSport - The Peak for Sport in Victoria

Councils have communicated two major areas of concern, firstly the protection of their assets (sporting fields) and secondly ensuring they provide a safe facility for participants.

Councils have stated that if grounds are used and all grass dies off, when the winter rains arrive grounds will become muddy and devoid of grass. The cost to council to repair ovals would be significant. Council's preferred option is to protect their asset. Councils measure ground hardness in many ways including penetrometer tests, clegg hammer tests, studded boot apparatus traction tests and soil moisture meter tests. These tests along with grass coverage consistency, soil strength, grass composition, surface evenness and water infiltration rate all form the basis of the assessment and will determine whether the council consider the grounds too hard to play sport on.

Some council's are examining alternative water sources including recycled water, grey water and waste water. Some council's (Boroondarra) have committed to spending \$50,000 per week to cart water to water some trees, parkland and sporting fields in their precinct. Most council's are considering planting grasses that are less dependent on water and are hardier such as bermuda or couch grass, hybrid couch grass and kikoyugrass.

It considers six important factors when determining suitability of usage:

- Type of sport to be played.
- Turf cover.
- Surface hardness.
- Surface evenness.
- Soil moisture content.

Civic Mutual Plus (CMP) insures all but one council in Victoria and Tasmania and has been represented by in house lawyer Michael Beasley at several council seminars on drought. It is his view that all parties must be responsible for the safety of the participants. He has also mentioned on several occasions that an appropriate match day check list that is diligently completed by clubs prior to a match will form the basis of due diligence. This diligent check helps to provide the insurer with satisfaction that every precaution has taken place prior to a match commencing.

Michael Beasley has recently stated that councils and other land managers should work closely with clubs and their associations to attempt to allow training or competition to take place. CMP is also of the view it is for clubs and their associations to decide if training or competition can take place, unless conditions are extremely poor. CMP is comfortable with the process that JLT Sport have adopted for clubs to implement for ground inspections on match days.

AFL National Insurance Program providers, JLT Sport, which insures over 95% of football leagues and clubs in Australia, has also stated that clubs will be better armed to defend a potential liability claim should they diligently complete the ground inspection report prior to a match commencing.

The University of Ballarat tabled a report that was completed in Jan 2007 and several interesting facts arose from their quantitative research.

- 23 of 47 LGA's interviewed had no policy or guidelines related to sports ground suitability for usage.
- A high variation of policies for maintenance and policies for detailed measures of ground status was evident.
- Compliance issues and insurance liability dominated the reasons for sports grounds assessment.
- Whilst intuitively, harder grounds equal increased risk of injury, research indicates that there is currently a lack of evidence linking hard ground to injury

AFL Victoria's View

Based upon the extensive involvement AFL Victoria and some of its member leagues have had with many councils, it is clear that all leagues and clubs need to work closely with their respective councils in engaging in open and regular communication on the state of grounds.

AFL Victoria supports council decisions to not allow preseason training and practice games and that we all work towards commencing our football season as scheduled. It should be noted that we consider AFL Auskick operations as part of the football community when ground usage is being considered however we do have an example in the Hume council providing Auskick with ground allocation for the Winter season. AFL Victoria believes that despite the existence of sound research that the risk to participants is not increased due to harder surfaces, we do believe that responsible club officials have a duty of care to declare a ground unsuitable for play due to

excessive hardness just as it would be unsuitable for play if goal post padding was not evident.

Alternative Training Ideas

AFL Victoria suggest that you visit the AFLVictoria website (www.aflvic.com.au) to access ideas for alternative training whilst there is no access to grounds. The direct link is www.footballvic.com.au/00051521-src.pdf.

Stage 4 Water Restrictions

AFL Victoria is very concerned about the impact stage 4 water restrictions will have on all grounds but particularly those with turf cricket pitches (turf tables). Stage 4 restrictions will be implemented when Melbourne's water storage levels hit 29.3%. Currently we sit at just over 34%. Stage 4 will prevent the watering of these turf tables, therefore creating a surface that will be a major risk management issue. In the past when there were no water restrictions, the turf table was watered regularly throughout the winter season to ensure a safe surface was provided for football.

AFL Victoria recommends that leagues, clubs and councils begin to plan now for Stage 4 and develop strategies to supply water to these turf tables. AFL Victoria's research has indicated that to water a turf table requires approximately 1000 litres of water. This must be applied via a light spray evenly across the area the previous day prior to competition. This will be sufficient to allow matches to be played the following day.

One option is for leagues, clubs and councils to pool their resources and share the cost of transporting tankers of recycled water to grounds with turf tables. One tanker has the capacity to transport at least 22000 litres of water, which is sufficient to water two grounds turf tables for at least a football season. This water must be pumped from the truck parked off the ground as the truck will cause extensive damage to the surface of the ground if it enters the playing arena. This would be considered only a temporary measure until the grounds become moist and softer due to winter rains. Once the turf table is watered, it is recommended that clubs that have a cover for the turf table, place the cover over the watered area to slow the drying process and keep the moisture in the turf table.

AFL Victoria believes that the decision that councils make regarding the suitability of grounds will drive the decision by leagues to alter fixtures. We recommend strongly to leagues that they wait until council make the decision before cancelling any games.

Furthermore, AFL Victoria believes it necessary for all involved to collaboratively develop alternate strategies to ensure that we are able to use our grounds into the future strategies focusing on storing water at clubs via tanks combined with other initiatives that could assist with overcoming the problems caused by the drought.

Finally, we believe strongly that any decision to close a venue and deprive children, adults and volunteers alike of the opportunity to be involved in a football club must be taken with all the facts and consequences clearly understood. Whilst we appreciate that some grounds may be hard in the early rounds, that alone should not be the only factor considered when closing a ground. The social impact on the individual and the community of a lack of participation must also be considered.

For any further information regarding this very important topic please contact Peter McDougall, AFL Victoria Community Football Development Manager on (03) 8663 3006.