

EWOV Connect

EWOV update

Annual Report shows surge in complaints [2](#)

New info sheets in different languages [3](#)

New water licensing fact sheet [3](#)

Community visits and forums [7](#)

Our most popular fact sheets [8](#)

Energy & water news & issues

Energy tariffs for Victorian residential customers deregulated from 2009 [4](#)

Tips on choosing an energy retailer [4](#)

Complaints about debt collection [5](#)

Dealing with direct marketers [5](#)

What's happening with water restrictions? [6](#)

Contacting EWOV [8](#)

The Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) (EWOV) opened in May 1996. To 31 October 2008, we had handled over 150,000 cases.

- *We provide independent advice, information and referral regarding energy and water services.*
- *We receive, investigate and facilitate the resolution of complaints involving consumers and energy and water service companies in Victoria.*
- *We identify, and where appropriate redress, systemic issues and refer these to energy and water companies and regulators.*
- *We work with customer groups, industry and regulators to drive ongoing customer service improvement and to prevent complaints.*



Message from the Ombudsman

We've recently released EWOV's 2008 Annual Report.

In it, I report that 2007/08 was an extraordinary year for our scheme and its staff.

We received a record 25,413 cases—up 39%.

It's not hard to understand the extra pressures this put on the EWOV team—as well as on our financial resources.

Throughout the year—as we dealt with the consequences of such an increase—we drew on EWOV's cultural values:

- *We strive for high quality in all areas of EWOV*
- *Good communication is fundamental to our work*
- *We work to high professional standards*
- *Our philosophy and actions embody working together*

It was pretty challenging, at times, to keep working together as a team when we were under such pressure.

But, we supported each other, we kept each other informed and we collaborated to get the job done.

It was a fantastic effort from a remarkable team.

There's a summary of EWOV's 2007/08 cases and issues on page 2. There's also information about cases from particular council and shire areas.

The Annual Report is on our website—in full and in parts.

Please feel free to contact us for a printed copy.

Fiona McLeod
Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria)

Annual report shows surge in complaints

Cases up 39% overall —complaints up 62%

We'd anticipated an 11% increase in cases from 2006/07 to 2007/08. We ended the year with 25,413 cases—a 39% increase.

Complaints were up 62% overall—up 59% in electricity, 88% in natural gas, 12% in liquefied petroleum gas, 6% in dual fuel and 27% in water. This was mostly due to problems two large energy retailers had with billing and customer interface systems.

Complaint investigations

We received 5,368 complaints for investigation—and, if we hadn't put in place the interim complaint receipt process explained in the report, we would have received an unprecedented 10,853.

We finalised 5,129 complaint investigations—91% were conciliated. The financial redress to customers was some \$1,266,460.

Most common issues

Billing continued to be the most common issue overall—48% of all cases. Billing cases were most commonly about high bills, billing errors and meter issues.

Credit was next at 13%. Credit cases were most commonly about the disconnection of electricity or gas or the restriction of water for debt, and payment difficulties and credit collection activities.

Customer profiles

93% of cases were residential.

50% of customers said they contacted us because they knew about EWOV. 17% said they found out about us through their energy or water company.

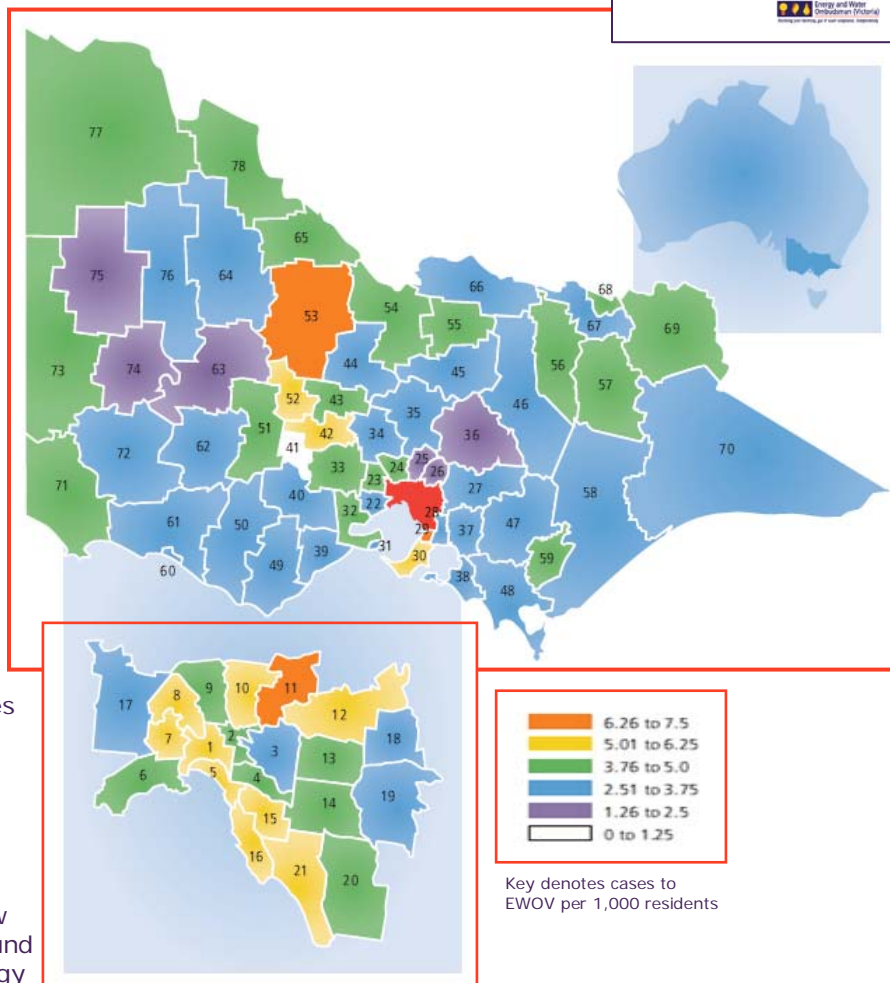
93% of customers rang us.

By Shire and Council areas

Taking residential populations into account, the parts of Victoria with the highest rates of residential energy and water cases were the Loddon Shire, City of Banyule, City of Frankston, City of Port Phillip and City of Manningham.

By comparison, the parts of Victoria with the highest raw numbers of EWOV residential cases were the Mornington Peninsula Shire, City of Monash, City of Greater Geelong, City of Banyule and City of Glen Eira.

Our Annual Report provides an overview of EWOV and the cases and issues we dealt with in 2007/08



Read more ...

- » *EWOV's Annual Report online in full and part PDFs:*
http://www.ewov.com.au/html/Annual%20Reports/Annual_Report_2008.html
- » *For a hard copy:* publications@ewov.com.au

We're working to reach more consumers whose first language isn't English

New EWOV info in different languages

We've recently had information sheets about EWOV translated into languages most commonly spoken by Victorians with little or no English.

The following languages were chosen based on 2006 census data.

We've sent these info sheets out to a range of community agencies.



- Arabic
- Cambodian
- Cantonese
- Croatian
- Greek
- Italian
- Korean
- Macedonian
- Maltese
- Mandarin
- Polish
- Russian
- Serbian
- Spanish
- Turkish
- Vietnamese

Authority to act forms
EWOV also has Authority to act forms in different languages. These are available on request from Conciliation staff.

More information

For copies or more information on these new info sheets—or our fact sheets generally ...

Contact EWOV's Community Liaison Administrator, Candyce Presland on 03 9649 7599 or email: publications@ewov.com.au

New EWOV fact sheet: water licensing

We've also published another EWOV fact sheet.

Called, *Water licensing and EWOV*, it's mainly for the rural water sector—for water licensees and those affected by licences.

The information in it will help anyone who may have a complaint decide whether to bring the issue to EWOV—or take it to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

12 EWOV fact sheets are available on our website (www.ewov.com.au) under Publications/fact sheets:

1. You've lodged your complaint. What happens next? [here](#)
2. Info for electricity customers using 40–160 MWh/yr [here](#)
3. Choosing an energy retailer [here](#)
4. High electricity, natural gas or water bills [here](#)
5. EWOV and LPG [here](#)
6. Charges on water bills (regional urban water) [here](#)
7. Charges on water bills (metropolitan water) [here](#)
8. Electricity, gas and water: Info for new transitional housing tenants [here](#)
9. Can't pay your energy or water bill? [here](#)
10. Disconnection & restriction for debt [here](#)
11. Electricity, gas & water meters [here](#)
12. Water Licensing & EWOV [here](#)

Energy tariffs for Victorian residential customers to be deregulated from 2009

Following the Australian Energy Market Commission's (AEMC's) finding that energy retail competition is effective in Victoria, legislation has been passed in the Victorian Parliament to deregulate residential energy standing prices from 1 January 2009.

Under the *Energy Legislation Amendment (Retail Competition and Other Matters) Act*, all energy retailers—not just local retailers—will have to publish standing tariffs at least one month before they take effect.

The obligation to supply will sit with the energy retailer holding the account for the site—this may or may not be the local retailer.

Energy retailers will have to publish their standing offers and certain market offers on their own websites—and certain market offers on the

Essential Service's Commission's (ESC's) website.

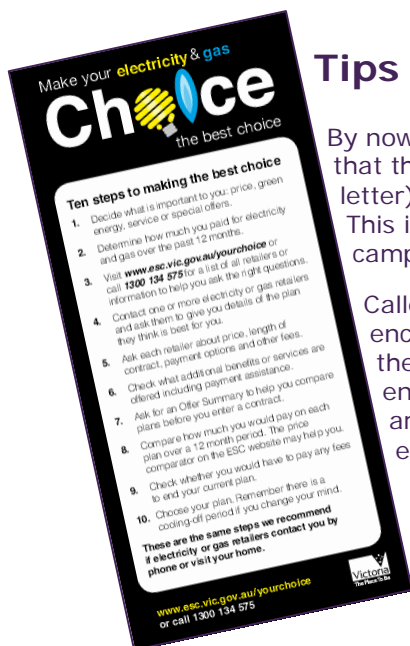
The ESC will report annually to the Minister on tariff movements.

The Act keeps open the possibility of the re-regulation of standing tariffs—but that would depend on the AEMC undertaking another review and finding competition is no longer effective and that price controls should be reintroduced.

Orders-in-Council are being developed by the Victorian Department of Primary Industries' Energy Division. These will further define the content of the Act, e.g. by resetting which customers are covered by the *Energy Retail Code*.

Co-incidentally, the Energy Marketing Code and Energy Retail Code have also changed—and the changes take effect from 1 January 2009.

Changes to energy tariffs may lead more customers to shop around



Tips on choosing an energy retailer

By now you should have received a Choice magnet info card that the Essential Services Commission was mailing (with a letter) to all Victorian households in late November 2008. This is being done as part of a consumer education campaign on the changes described above.

Called *Ten steps to making the best choice*, the info card will encourage consumers to think about what is important to them in buying electricity and gas (e.g. price, green energy, service, special offers), compare this to what they are getting and paying now, then actively seek offers from energy retailers that suit their circumstances.

More information

The 'Your choice' section on the Essential Services Commission's website: <http://www.esc.vic.gov.au/public/yourchoice>

Useful information about Choosing an energy retailer on the Community Agency Info pages of the EWOV website: http://www.ewov.com.au/html/Community/Choosing_energy_retailer.html



What does this mean for you?

- You should make sure you have the latest versions of the Energy Marketing and Energy Retail codes. They're on the ESC's website here: <http://www.esc.vic.gov.au/public/For+Consumers/Energy/Useful+tips+and+resources/Your+rights+and+responsibilities.htm>
- You should also read the information on the ESC's 'Your choice' page. See box above for link.

Reminders about dealing with debt collection and direct marketing situations

Complaints about debt collection

EWOV can investigate complaints about debt collection

Following on from the recent *Debt Collection Forum* run by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC), we thought it was worth reminding you that EWOV can investigate debt collection issues—even though the debt may have been outsourced by an energy or water company to a debt collection agency. If your client has a complaint about a debt collection agency—that relates to the agency's action on an outstanding energy or water bill—you should check with us about whether we can look into the matter.

More information

» *The ACCC/ASIC's Debt collection guideline: for collectors and credits*
<http://www.accc.gov.au/content/item.phtml?itemId=733222&nodeId=94fd7b1d55f19d5614b8a9eddd074fa8&fn=ACCC%E2%80%94ASIC%20Debt%20collection%20guideline:%20for%20collectors%20and%20creditors.pdf>

Dealing with direct marketers

While it makes good sense for consumers to shop around for electricity and gas deals that meet their needs, they may not welcome phone calls—or door-to-door visits—from energy marketers.

We are often contacted by consumers who don't want to be phoned—or otherwise approached—by energy sales representatives.



We remind these customers of the following actions they can take:

- They can list their Australian fixed line and mobile phone numbers on the Do Not Call Register—provided the numbers are used primarily for private or domestic purposes: <https://www.donotcall.gov.au/>
- In response to complaints about door-to-door marketers operating throughout Victoria in a number of industries, the Consumer Action Law Centre last year launched DO NOT KNOCK campaign and stickers for homes. There's more information on the Consumer Action Law Centre website: <http://www.consumeraction.org.au>



What does this mean for you?

If you—or your client—believe an energy marketer isn't following the requirements about direct contact with consumers, you can let EWOV know.

What's happening with water restrictions?

From the Victorian Government's *Our Water, Our Future* website

There were no changes made to towns on restriction during September 2008.

The total number of Victorian towns on restriction at 30 September 2008 was 327:

- 59 towns on Stage 1
- 35 towns on Stage 2
- 41 towns on Stage 3
- 18 towns on Stage 3a
- 77 towns on Stage 4 with general exemptions
- 97 towns on Stage 4.

Around 150 towns weren't on water restrictions and were subject to Permanent Water Saving Rules.

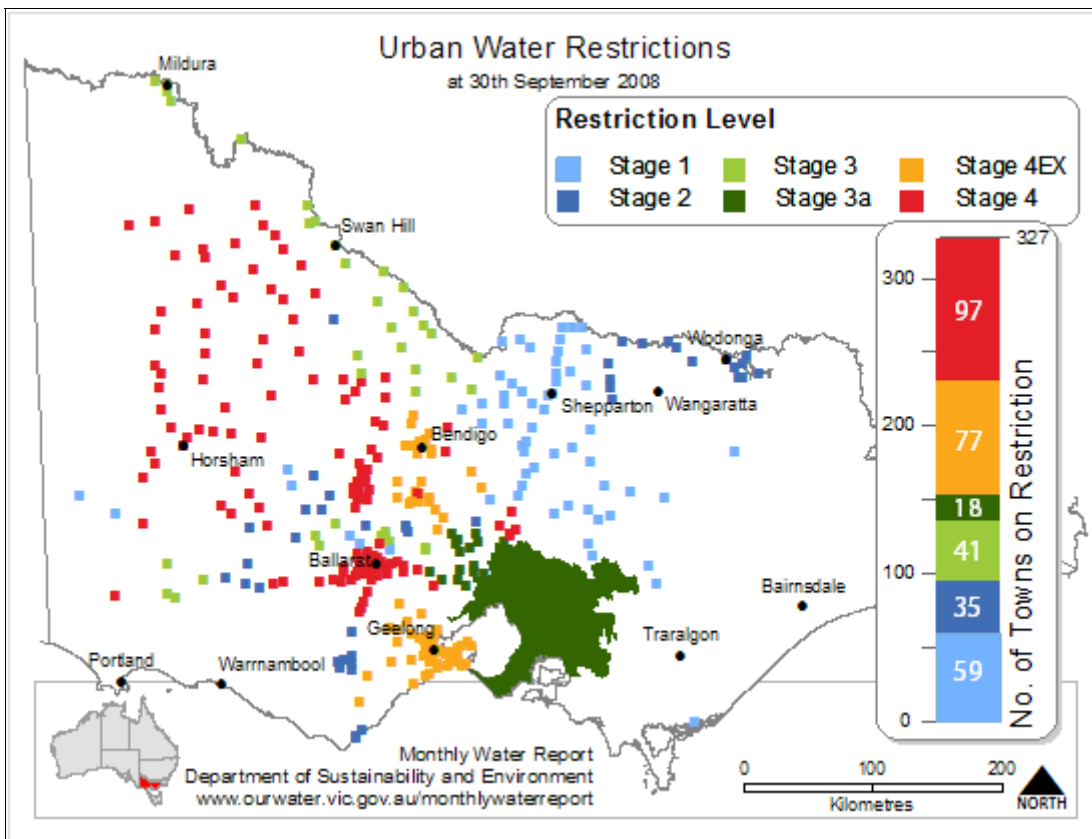
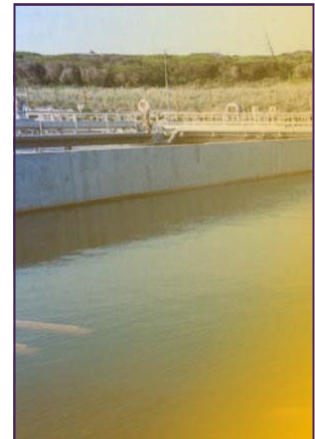
New search tool

Want the latest information on the water restrictions in your area—or in other parts of Victoria?

Use this new search tool on the *Our Water, Our Future* website for information on water restrictions in different parts of the state and the names of local water companies: <http://www.ourwater.vic.gov.au/resources/inyourregion>

This site also explains what is allowed under each stage of water restrictions.

Helping you keep track of how water can be used in different parts of the state



Building awareness of EWOV through community visits

Community visits in Echuca and Shepparton

In October 2008, Ombudsman Fiona McLeod and Conciliators, Colleen Eccles and Erin Dempsey, travelled to Echuca and Shepparton for a 3-day regional community visit.

They met with community and local government representatives, including: Crossenvale Community House, St Lukes Anglicare, Veterans Support Centre, Rural Housing Network Shepparton, Greater Shepparton City Council and Goulburn Valley Regional Council.

A workshop on energy marketing issues was held with the Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District and attended by members of the Iraqi community in Shepparton.

A range of energy and water issues were raised in these meetings:

- EWOV's jurisdiction
- energy marketing, including aggressive and frequent marketing to vulnerable customers and misleading information—according to the agencies, many customers aren't aware they can enter into a verbal contract over the phone
- issues arising out of transfers, including termination fees, cooling off periods and double billing
- timeframes for disconnection/restriction of supply
- financial hardship programmes available to customers
- payment plans and capacity to pay
- concessions and government assistance for hardship customers, e.g. the Utility Relief Grant
- quality of water in regional areas



Ombudsman, Fiona McLeod, with Ange Upton, Financial Counsellor for St Luke's Anglicare in Echuca.



Representatives from the Rural Housing Network in Shepparton with Ombudsman, Fiona McLeod.

Anti-Poverty Week Forums

In October 2008, the Salvation Army's South East Services Network, Peninsula Youth and Family Services ran two Anti-Poverty Week Forums in Frankston and Doveton.

The forums were part of an Australian-wide initiative to strengthen public understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and hardship—and encourage research, discussion and action to address these issues.

Stephen Gatford, (EWOV's Manager Public Affairs and Policy), Belinda Crivelli (Complex Case Manager) and Candyce Presland (Community Liaison Administrator) joined a range of agency staff, carers and volunteers to talk about EWOV and its role.

At the Anti-Poverty Week Forums: Darren Meddings (Salvation Army) and Belinda Crivelli (EWOV)

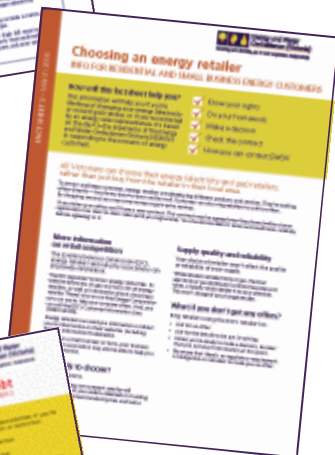


Our most popular fact sheets

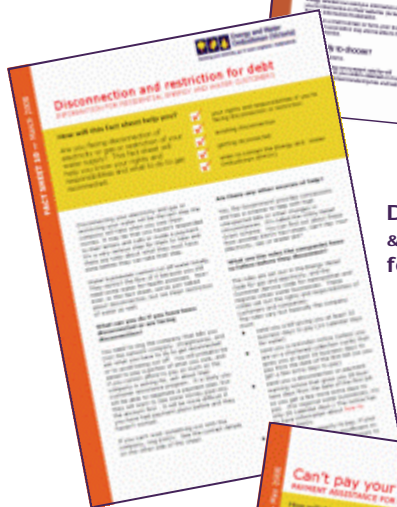
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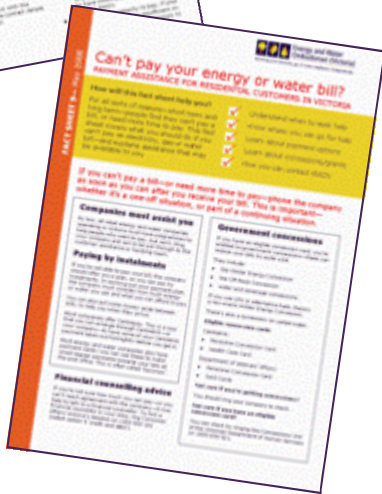
High bills



Choosing an energy retailer



Disconnection & restriction for debt



Can't pay? Payment assistance

Contacting EWOV

We can help with electricity, gas (natural and LPG) and water problems that can't be resolved directly with an electricity, gas or water company.

Our services are free and available to everyone.

What kinds of problems?

- the provision and supply of a service (or the failure to provide or supply it)
- billing
- credit and payment services
- disconnections and restrictions
- refundable advances (security deposits)
- land and property issues

How do we resolve problems?

Most things can be sorted out through discussion and agreement.

In a small number of cases, the Ombudsman makes a final decision. Just like an umpire.

Decisions are binding on energy and water companies and may include awards of up to \$20,000 or, if all parties agree, up to \$50,000.

More on our website: www.ewov.com.au

Contacting EWOV

Freecall: 1800 500 509

If the phone service is restricted — ring 12550 (Telstra reverse charges) and quote (03) 9649 7599 — we'll accept the reverse charges and the call cost.

Calls from mobile phones may attract charges — we can ring you back.

Freefax: 1800 500 549
Interpreter service: 131 450
National Relay Service: 133 677
Email: ewovinfo@ewov.com.au
Website: www.ewov.com.au
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