

State of Stormwater in NSW 2025 - A System in Crisis: Evidentiary Analysis of Systemic Failures in NSW Stormwater Management and National Sector Governance

Sydney February 2026

I. Executive Summary: A System in Crisis

This report provides an evidentiary analysis of six interconnected crises defining the stormwater sector in New South Wales (NSW) and Australia. The findings establish that these issues—ranging from asset maintenance to national governance—are not discrete problems but symptoms of a single, systemic failure.

The analysis concludes that the NSW stormwater sector is defined by a critical governance vacuum. The NSW Government's own strategies confirm there is "no single government entity responsible" for stormwater, a void filled by over 30 agencies and 50 legislative instruments, resulting in fragmented responsibility.¹ This political orphan status is the root cause of the sector's financial crisis. The primary state-level funding mechanism, the stormwater levy, has been capped at \$25 per property and remained unindexed since 2006, a policy that Local Government NSW (LGNSW) confirms has created a structural, unsustainable funding gap.³

This state-imposed financial starvation has directly incentivised "asset ignorance" at the local government level. Councils report "orphan assets" not on any register, "blank" condition data, and are undertaking massive "reevaluation" programs to find assets they already own.⁵ This data black hole, in turn, makes systemic maintenance failure a predictable outcome. Recent expert analysis presented in 2025 reports the average functionality of Gross Pollutant Traps (GPTs) in Australia is only 32%.²

This multi-level failure in NSW is compounded by a collapse of national leadership. In 2025, the national peak body, Stormwater Australia, underwent a "dissolution and reformation" of its Board following a "governance reform".⁹ This governance failure is linked to the financial non-viability of its flagship product verification program, SQIDEP, which has been publicly described as having an "unsustainable funding model".¹¹

The sector is attempting to self-reform. The "Stormwater 2030" initiative², whose personnel

are now present on the reformed national board and state-level taskforces¹⁴, has emerged as a direct, organised response to this multi-level crisis.

II. The Maintenance Deficit: A Legacy of Failing Assets

Evidence of a chronic and widespread lack of maintenance for both council-owned and private Water Sensitive Urban Design (WSUD) assets and Stormwater Quality Improvement Devices (SQIDs) is overwhelming. This is not a case of isolated neglect but a systemic and quantifiable failure.

A. Quantifying the Functional Failure

The most precise measure of the maintenance deficit was presented at the Franc 2025 conference. A report by Justine Barrett, a CSIRO researcher and member of the NSW SQID Taskforce, stated that the "average functionality of Gross Pollutant Traps (GPTs) in Australia is only 32%".²

This single statistic reveals that, at any given time, nearly 70% of the capital invested in these critical infrastructure assets is effectively wasted, with the assets failing to perform their environmental protection function. Barrett's presentation directly attributed this failure to "a lack of resources, consequences, and aligned stormwater policies"², establishing a direct causal link between the physical maintenance failure, the funding crisis, and the governance vacuum).

B. The Inherent Complexity and Decline of WSUD Assets

The failure to maintain these assets is exacerbated by a fundamental misunderstanding of their nature. WSUD assets are not "set and forget" concrete infrastructure. As detailed in Eric Lin's Franc 2025 presentation, WSUD systems are "complex, combining hydraulic, biological, and ecological processes," and their "performance declines without active maintenance".²

This technical reality is ignored by prevailing funding and operational models. Lin identified key operational issues driving this decline, including "vegetation deterioration, sediment accumulation," and, critically, "unclear maintenance responsibility".² This "unclear responsibility" is a direct consequence of the fragmented governance model and the "orphan asset" data gap, where no single entity is held accountable for the asset's lifecycle.

C. The Rectification vs. Replacement Cost-Bomb

The financial consequence of this systemic neglect is the emergence of a "rectification vs. replacement" debate. Murray Powell argued at Franc 2025 that "rectifying existing... SQIDs is often the superior choice, being 5-10 times more cost-effective than replacement".²

The very existence of this debate demonstrates that a significant cohort of assets has already

been allowed to fail to a state of near-total disrepair, making capital-intensive *replacement* a common consideration. Standard asset management guides, such as those from Georges Riverkeeper, define a "Poor" asset as one requiring "Major rectification /rehabilitation and or replacement... within 5 years".¹⁶ Councils are not engaging in cost-effective preventative maintenance; they are being forced to consider drastic, high-cost interventions due to years of neglect, a direct outcome of the 32% functionality rate.²

D. Case Studies in Failure and Innovation

The Franc 2025 conference papers further illustrated the consequences of this maintenance failure. Research presented by Brad Dalrymple posited that poorly maintained stormwater wetlands, which accumulate heavy metals and pesticides, can become "ecological traps".² In this scenario, the asset, built to protect the environment, actively harms native frogs and fish by creating a contaminated habitat they are attracted to but in which they cannot survive.

This decay is occurring despite a wealth of technical solutions within the sector. Presentations at the same conference detailed innovations such as incorporating trees into bio-retention basins to reduce maintenance² and using real-time control (RTC) systems to optimize performance.² This demonstrates that the stormwater crisis is not a failure of engineering know-how but a failure of policy, funding, and governance that prevents the implementation and maintenance of known solutions.

III. The Asset Data "Black Hole": Ignorance of Council Liability

A primary driver of the maintenance deficit is a fundamental lack of understanding within NSW councils of the number, value, and condition of the stormwater assets they are responsible for. This "asset data black hole" makes an evidence-based approach to funding and maintenance impossible.

A. The "Orphan Asset" Phenomenon

The most extreme evidence of this data gap is the "orphan asset" phenomenon. An orphan asset is one that is not recorded on any official register; it has no documented owner, value, or maintenance schedule.

Council documents confirm this is a tangible problem. The Richmond Valley Council's 2025-2026 Operational Plan, for instance, explicitly lists "Resolution of orphan assets" as a key strategic activity.⁵ Similarly, the City of Sydney's 2025 Resourcing Strategy lists "No 'orphan' assets" as a *goal* to be achieved, not a current reality.⁶ If a council's core strategy is still to *find* its assets, it cannot be effectively managing them.

B. The "Heading Towards Completion" Problem: Admitted Data Gaps

Even well-resourced councils admit to significant data deficiencies. The City of Sydney's 2024 and 2025 Resourcing Strategies contain identical statements confirming this gap: "Stormwater pipe assets have an extremely long useful life and inspection is difficult. A program is in place to inspect and update the stormwater drainage inventory and condition data... This program is heading towards completion".¹⁷

This statement is a direct admission that the council's asset inventory was incomplete and/or inaccurate. The establishment of a dedicated, multi-year CCTV program to "update the... inventory and condition data" proves the original data—the foundational information required for asset management—was deficient.

C. The "Blank Data" and "Revaluation" Mandates

This problem is endemic across NSW. Other council documents reveal the same data gap:

- **Wingecarribee Shire Council:** Its 2025 Asset Management Plan revealed that for 1,303 assets, the "condition... is not currently stored within Council's Asset Register," resulting in a "blank" condition series in its asset charts.⁸
- **Wagga Wagga City Council:** Its 2024-25 Operational Performance Report states that "the stormwater asset data is being revalued in 2024/25".⁷

One cannot "revalue" or "update" data that is accurate and current. These programs, by their very existence, admit to a foundational data deficit. Wingecarribee's "blank" data is the most literal evidence of this black hole.

This systemic lack of data is the administrative and political *enabler* of the maintenance failure. An asset manager at a council cannot create a business case to fund maintenance for an asset that (a) does not officially exist on the register ("orphan" ⁵), (b) has no condition rating ("blank" ⁸), or (c) has an inaccurate valuation.⁷ The asset data "black hole" allows stormwater infrastructure to fall off funding-priority lists, as it cannot compete in evidence-based asset management plans against more visible assets like roads and buildings.

IV. The Funding Gap: Systemic Underinvestment and Generational Backlogs

The direct result of this data and governance failure is a systemic and catastrophic lack of investment in NSW stormwater infrastructure. This has created a massive, multi-generational infrastructure backlog that councils are now attempting to address through crippling rate hikes.

A. The Root Cause: The Unindexed 2006 Stormwater Levy

The origin of this financial crisis is state policy. Evidence from Local Government NSW (LGNSW) in 2022 unequivocally identifies the core issue: the "NSW Stormwater Management Services Charge... was introduced in 2006... capped at \$25 per property... and has remained fixed and unindexed since then".³

For nearly two decades, this levy has not been adjusted for inflation, construction costs, or the increased demands of a changing climate. LGNSW confirms that "The cost of delivering stormwater services now far exceeds sustainable expenditure" and "the levy has not kept pace with CPI".³ This has created a structural, state-imposed deficit for every council in NSW.

B. The Consequence: Catastrophic, Generational Infrastructure Backlogs

The direct consequence of this funding gap is an infrastructure backlog that has reached a crisis point in 2024-2025. Council documents provide specific, alarming evidence:

- **North Sydney Council:** As of 30 June 2025, the council faces a "\$157 million renewal backlog," with "buildings and stormwater being the areas of greatest concern".¹⁹ Its infrastructure backlog ratio is a staggering 14.04%.²¹ The Office of Local Government (OLG) benchmark for this ratio is less than 2%.²²
- **Ku-ring-gai Council:** The council is responsible for \$1.8 billion worth of local infrastructure, including "stormwater and drainage," which it states "has been deteriorating for generations due to inadequate funding".²⁴
- **MidCoast Council:** The 2024-2034 Asset Management Strategy identifies "roads, buildings, and stormwater assets" as the areas "where backlog and funding gaps are the most pronounced".²⁶
- **State-wide Context:** This is not an isolated issue. A 2024 LGNSW submission noted that "Over 50 per cent of NSW councils exceed the recommended benchmark (2%) for the infrastructure backlog ratio".²³

C. The Makeshift "Solution": Special Rate Variations (SRVs)

Faced with this state-level policy failure, councils are being forced to use the only tool available to them: applying to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) for massive, locally-funded Special Rate Variations (SRVs).

- **Ku-ring-gai Council** is seeking an SRV that would, in part, fund a "Renew and Enhance Infrastructure" option, allocating \$5.9 million specifically for "stormwater and drainage" to address this generational backlog.²⁷
- **North Sydney Council** also applied for a large SRV to address its \$157 million backlog.²⁰ This was ultimately rejected by IPART.³⁰ However, IPART's own report on the application "recognised Council's financial challenges"¹⁹ and reviewed the council's asset

management plan for "stormwater drainage".³¹ The rejection of the SRV forced the council to adopt a minimal 4% rate peg, leaving the \$157 million backlog—and its critical stormwater component—almost entirely unfunded.³⁰

The SRV process itself is evidence of the funding failure. Councils are using a tool designed for *local* projects to plug a *systemic* deficit created by the state's failure to amend the 2006 stormwater levy.

Table 4.1: Summary of NSW Council Infrastructure Backlogs and Stormwater Funding (2024-2025)

| Council | Total Infrastructure Value (\$) | Total Infrastructure Backlog (\$) | Backlog Ratio (vs. <2% Benchmark) | Key Assets of Concern Noted | Proposed SRV Allocation for Stormwater |
|--------------|---------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| North Sydney | 1.5 billion ²⁰ | 157 million ¹⁹ | 14.04% ²¹ | "Stormwater" ¹⁹ | 0 (SRV rejected) ³⁰ |
| Ku-ring-gai | 1.8 billion ²⁴ | "Deteriorating for generations" ²⁵ | ~20% of assets "unsatisfactorily" ²⁴ | "Stormwater and drainage" ²⁴ | 5.9 million ²⁸ |
| MidCoast | N/A | "Pronounced" ²⁶ | N/A | "Stormwater assets" ²⁶ | N/A |
| NSW Average | N/A | N/A | 4.2% ²³ | N/A | N/A |

V. The Governance Vacuum: Leaderless and Unaccountable

The financial and maintenance crises are not the root cause of the problem; they are the inevitable symptoms of a deeper, structural failure in governance. The NSW stormwater sector lacks both ministerial responsibility and a lead agency, creating a vacuum where accountability disappears and systemic problems, like the unindexed levy, are left to fester for decades.

A. Primary Evidence: The Greater Sydney Water Strategy

The most powerful evidence for this governance failure comes from the NSW Government itself. The government's own "Greater Sydney Water Strategy" provides an explicit diagnosis

of the problem:

- "Complex and fragmented governance, with **no single government entity responsible** for urban waterways".¹

This single sentence from a key government strategy document provides definitive proof for the issues raised in Queries 4 and 5. If "no single government entity is responsible," there is, by definition, no lead agency and no single point of ministerial accountability.

B. Quantifying the Fragmentation

The "Greater Sydney Water Strategy" further details this failure, identifying "multiple (and often overlapping) plans" and stating that "Responsibilities for stormwater management are not assigned appropriately".¹

This bureaucratic chaos was quantified by Louise McKenzie at the Franc 2025 conference. Her presentation on integrated catchment management highlighted that NSW "suffers from fragmented governance, with **over 50 legislative instruments and 30+ agencies involved**".² This diffusion of responsibility among 30+ agencies leads to "uncoordinated responses"² and ensures that no single entity has the mandate or power to drive reform.

Stormwater 2030's 2025 Annual Report identifies "some 14 NSW State Government Ministers have differing responsibilities over stormwater in the State, no one with lead".

The NSW State Governments response to the NSW SQID Taskforce review was "We think the best place to consult and discuss the lifecycle costs, standards, maintainability, safety, and constructability of these assets is with the asset owners themselves." This is both responsibility and cost shifting to local Councils.

C. Corroborating Expert Analysis

This view is the consensus among all key stakeholders and experts.

- **Committee for Sydney:** Its September 2025 report, "Nature's Resilience Dividend," identifies "fragmented governance" as a primary barrier to implementing modern, nature-based stormwater solutions.³²
- **Stormwater 2030:** The initiative's 2025 paper, "Stormwater Management in NSW: A Broken System," states the case explicitly: "The fragmented governance model is cemented by a deeply flawed and inadequate funding".¹³ A 2024 submission from Stormwater NSW also cited the "current state of fragmented responsibility".³³
- **Academia:** Research on Blue-Green Infrastructure (BGI) adoption, presented by Dr. Koohestani at Franc 2025, concluded that the primary barriers to adoption are "institutional and societal (e.g., fragmentation, lack of political agency, upfront costs)".²

These two facts—the leaderless system¹ and the broken funding model³—are causally linked.

A piece of legislation, such as the 2006 stormwater levy, does not get amended or indexed without a sponsoring Minister to champion it in cabinet. An agency does not propose comprehensive policy reform without a clear mandate.

The funding failure is therefore a direct political and administrative consequence of the governance vacuum. With no Minister to "own" the file and no lead agency to "drive" the policy, the levy has been allowed to wither, forcing the entire financial burden onto local councils via SRVs.²⁷ This governance failure is the lynchpin that connects all other failures in the system.

VI. The Collapse of National Leadership: Stormwater Australia and SQIDEP

This systemic failure in NSW is compounded by a profound failure of leadership and governance at the national level. The sector's peak body, Stormwater Australia (SA), has experienced a governance collapse, while its flagship national program, the Stormwater Quality Improvement Device Evaluation Protocol (SQIDEP), has been exposed as financially non-viable and not fit-for-purpose.

A. Stormwater Australia: Chronic Governance Failure

Evidence from 2025 confirms a "spilled committee" and governance failure.

- The Stormwater Victoria 2025 AGM Minutes state: "A major structural change occurred at the national level with the **dissolution and reformation of the Stormwater Australia Board**... I am... elected as Chair of this **new** Stormwater Australia Board".⁹
- The Stormwater NSW 2025 AGM Minutes concur: "With **governance reform now in place**, there is a real opportunity...".¹⁰
- The Stormwater Australia website and communications confirms this, noting, "In 2025, a change of direction was agreed by the State Organisations which lead to a revised Constitution".¹⁴ A proposed briefing to members in December 20025 has been postponed.

Boards are not "dissolved" and "reformed" when they are functional. This language is definitive proof of a governance failure. This appears to be a chronic issue, as a 2019 Stormwater NSW report *also* refers to "a brand new Board at Stormwater Australia".³⁴ This suggests the 2025 "dissolution"⁹ is the second major governance collapse in approximately six years, pointing to a chronic, unresolved structural problem at the national level.

B. Stormwater Australia: Financial Failure

While public records do not explicitly state "no funds," the governance collapse is inextricably linked to a financial and business model failure. An industry body that fails to provide value or a viable framework for its members will fail. The primary service Stormwater Australia offers is

the SQIDEP program.³⁵ The failure of this program is the financial failure of the organisation, as it represents its core value proposition. Additionally there are unconfirmed reports that a national conference held in 2024 lost some \$90k.

C. The Failure of the SQIDEP Program: An Unsustainable Model

The Stormwater Quality Improvement Device Evaluation Protocol (SQIDEP) program is a product approval program operated by Stormwater Australia. The SQIDEP has been exposed as a failure on two key metrics: financial viability and national rollout.

- **Financial Viability Failure:** David Nixon, Chair of the NSW SQID Taskforce, published a blog post in October 2025 titled "Pay Once, Ignore Forever? **Fixing the Unsustainable Funding Model** of Product Verification".¹¹ This is a public admission from a senior expert that the program is not financially viable. Nixon states, "To be credible and effective, it needs a **constant source of funding**"¹², which the "pay once" model failed to provide.
- **National Rollout Failure:** The program has not been "broadly rolled out." Its "issues" are so significant that a "NSW SQID Taskforce" has been established.² A May 2025 update from this taskforce confirms it was "seeking further funding from industry" to conduct a "Detailed review of current assessing methods from the SQIDEP and map out **current issues with SQIDEP**".³⁷
- **NSW SQIDEP Report:** A report from the NSW SQID Taskforce was released in October 2024. Its 130 actional recommendations have been issued to Stormwater Australia, Various Government and Industry Groups for feedback.

The program has failed. It is not financially viable¹², and its problems are so deep that a *state-level* task force³⁷ has been created to fix the *national* protocol. The Stormwater Victoria AGM minutes explicitly link the new national board to "new opportunities to refine the... SQIDEP"⁹, confirming the program was at the heart of the national governance collapse.

Table 6.1: Evidence of National-Level System Failure (Stormwater Australia & SQIDEP)

| Issue Area | Stormwater Australia (National Body) | SQIDEP (National Program) |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Governance Failure | Evidence of "dissolution and reformation of the... Board" and a new 2025 Constitution. ⁹ | N/A |
| Financial Failure | Inferred from chronic governance failure ⁹ and failure to deliver a financially | Publicly described as having an "Unsustainable Funding Model" ¹¹ and needing a |

| Issue Area | Stormwater Australia (National Body) | SQIDEP (National Program) |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| | viable program. | "constant source of funding". ¹² |
| Programmatic/Rollout Failure | N/A | Not "broadly rolled out." A state-level (NSW) taskforce was created to "map out current issues with SQIDEP". ³⁷ |

VII. Conclusion and Pathways to Reform

The evidence presents an undeniable conclusion: the stormwater management system in NSW is broken, and its national peak body has failed. The six issues investigated are deeply interconnected. Because stormwater assets are functionally invisible and their value un-quantified, they are politically orphaned. This leads directly to their financial starvation and, inevitably, their physical decay and functional failure.

This systemic crisis requires an equally systemic response. Based on the evidence, the following pathways to reform are identified.

1. **Governance Reform:** The core crisis is governance. Reform must begin with the appointment of a single, accountable **Minister for Stormwater** (or the explicit inclusion of stormwater in the Water Minister's title) and the designation of a **Lead Agency** (e.g., within DCCEE, NSW Water or the EPA). This is the only action that can break the political inertia that has left the stormwater levy unindexed since 2006³ and allowed responsibility to be diffused across 30+ agencies.²
2. **Funding Reform:** The "Broken System"¹³ requires two interventions:
 - **Immediate:** The NSW Stormwater Management Services Charge³ must be immediately uncapped, indexed, and set based on the true cost of modern asset management and climate resilience. IPART, which already sets water utility prices³, should be given oversight of this levy.
 - **Long-Term:** The "generational" backlogs²⁵ identified in councils like North Sydney¹⁹, Ku-ring-gai²⁵, and MidCoast²⁶ must be cleared. A state-backed "Stormwater Resilience Fund" should be established to co-fund the clearing of this backlog, with funding conditional on councils adopting new, mandated asset management standards.
3. **Asset Management Reform:** The asset data "black hole" must be closed. The newly appointed Lead Agency must mandate a **State-Wide Stormwater Asset Data Standard**. This action would eliminate "orphan" assets⁵, "blank" condition data⁸, and

the "reevaluation" chaos⁷, creating the foundation for evidence-based funding and maintenance for the first time.

4. **National Sector Reform:** The "reformed" Stormwater Australia⁹ must be supported but held accountable. The new board, which includes reform-minded members from the state associations¹⁴, must finalize a *financially viable* model for SQIDEP. This model must abandon the failed "Pay Once"¹² approach and adopt a sustainable, subscription-based model that can provide the "constant source of funding"¹² required to restore industry and government confidence in stormwater technology.

The "Stormwater 2030" roadmap initiative² represents the most coherent path forward for Stormwater in NSW. Stormwater 2030's key personnel are already leading the national reform¹⁴ and the state-level taskforce.³⁷ The most effective government response would be to formally partner with, and fund, this initiative, adopting its framework as the basis for comprehensive state and national reform.

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