

Urban Water Stewardship Framework 2024–2025 Round Summary Findings



About the Urban Water Stewardship Framework

The Urban Water Stewardship Framework (framework) is supporting councils and the development and construction industry in the Great Barrier Reef catchment to evaluate their urban water management practices and identify opportunities for improvement.

The framework provides an evidence basis for identifying and prioritising aspects to invest in to help bring them up to current best practice standards. It also helps generate greater dialogue between councils and urban developers in terms of how they can act collectively to generate better water quality outcomes.

The Urban Water Stewardship Framework assessed water management practices and activities related to three main areas:



erosion and sediment control, along with stormwater treatment design and construction, during the construction phase of urban development (Developing Urban component),



stormwater treatment asset management and the protection of riparian zones and natural wetlands in established urban areas (Established Urban component),



operation and maintenance of sewage treatment plants (STP) and associated sewer networks (Point Source component).

The framework assessment process was applied for the first time in 2020–2021. It has been implemented biennially since within the Great Barrier Reef catchment with the latest assessment round in 2024–2025.

With additional Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) funding, the framework was applied beyond the Reef regional report card partnership regions for the first time in 2024–2025.

Over the five years of assessment, the framework has been applied in 19 local government areas (LGAs), spanning all major urban centres, all six Reef natural resource management (NRM) regions. The UWSF data has now been collected at least once in 19 of the 30 LGAs in the catchment and on three occasions for 10 of these. This provides a representative evaluation of urban water management in the Great Barrier Reef catchment over the past five years.

Combined 2024–2025 results and key findings for the four participating Reef regional report card partnership regions are presented here, including changes since 2020–2021.



■ A-level practice

■ B-level practice

■ C-level practice

■ D-level practice

📄 Planning and governance

🔧 Infrastructure management and maintenance

👥 Social approaches

📊 Monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement



Main Results

- Across all LGAs within the four regions, the average level of practice across all management aspects in 2024–2025 was C level. This is consistent with the two previous assessment rounds.
- This outcome was once again driven by the on-average C level result for the Developing Urban and Established Urban components, indicating that the biggest areas for improvement relate to diffuse source pollution management (i.e. managing erosion and stormwater run-off).
- The average level of practice for the Point Source component, which relates to the operation and maintenance of sewage treatment plants and associated sewer networks, was once again B level (current best practice).
- Out of the 16 LGAs assessed in 2024–2025, six recorded an overall urban water management rating of B level practice.
- Of the nine councils that participated in all three assessment rounds and provided data to the Queensland Government for analysis for each, six improved their framework scores for overall urban water management compared 2020–2021, though generally not enough to alter the management practice rating. Framework scores for overall urban water management declined for the other three councils during this period. Hence, urban water management in the Great Barrier Reef catchment is mainly trending in the right direction, but any improvement has been incremental to date.

Key Findings

- At the end of the five-year assessment period, urban water management remains below best practice level at the broad Great Barrier Reef catchment spatial scale, representing a moderate to high level of risk to the quality of water discharged from urban areas to the Reef.
- Only incremental improvement has been observed during this period and, this only in some locations.
- Urban point source management has been delivered consistently at best management practice level, at the cross-regional scale and in most of the Reef council LGAs assessed.
- By contrast, urban diffuse source management has been delivered consistently below best management practice level at the cross-regional scale with few instances of this best management practice implementation at the Reef council LGA scale.
- Based on the established disparity between management practice level for Point Source and the Developing and Established urban components, a strong compliance enforcement aspect appears key to developing and implementing effective management processes and achieving good water quality outcomes.
- Capacity building is an essential, foundational activity but, on its own, is unlikely to achieve improved stormwater and erosion and sediment control in LGAs within the Reef catchment. Stronger commitment to compliance is needed to affect real change.
- Even though the level of practice for Developing and Established Urban could be better, some aspects linked to these components are being done well.
- For the Developing Urban component, councils are good at ensuring Erosion and Sediment Control Plans are prepared and assessed by suitably qualified professionals as part of development approval conditions and that these routinely include site rehabilitation. Staff are generally well trained in effective erosion and sediment control measures.
- Management practice level improvement for Developing Urban could be achieved through the incorporation of clearer critical hold points and adaptive risk management strategies into Erosion and Sediment Control Plans and Site Based Stormwater

Management Plans. Other measures include increasing the requirement for International Erosion Control Association-defined suitably qualified persons to prepare Erosion and Sediment Control Plans as part of development approval conditions and greater adoption of High Efficiency Sediment Basins at sites where these are appropriate.

- For the Established Urban component, councils are good at: keeping lawn clippings out of waterways and stormwater drains, supporting local communities rehabilitate waterways and implement clean up days and delivering on their Reef Guardian Council action plans.
- Management practice level improvement for Established Urban could be achieved through greater adoption of formal Stormwater Quality Management Plans outlining the stormwater infrastructure and catchment protection needs for the LGA and the resources required to meet these needs, incorporating a stormwater and natural waterway asset management system.
- Some aspects of Point Source management were done at current best practice level or above by most or all participating councils. This included: diverting as much treated wastewater from release as practical through application to nearby land or beneficial reuse; having appropriate sewer network asset management systems in place; training and capacity building strategies to maintain staff competencies; and having early detection systems in place to minimise leaks from the sewer network.
- Further improvement in Point Source management could potentially be achieved through the utilisation of existing stakeholder networks to develop catchment restoration or stormwater treatment-based offset solutions to address expected rises in sewerage treatment plant nutrient load emission with population increase.

Where to next?

- A five-yearly review of the Urban Water Stewardship Framework assessment is underway, with review findings and an updated implementation manual to be released in early 2026–2027 to allow biennial implementation to continue, if recommended.
- A range of new urban water management initiatives are being implemented in the next five-year period to supplement existing capacity building and Reef Guardian Council programs, which are expected to help improve practice levels. These include:
 - » A behavioural sciences assessment of practice level decision making;
 - » The establishment of whole of urban footprint stormwater models in priority urban catchments to better estimate pollutant loads and guide stormwater management decision making and investment;
 - » The Great Barrier Reef Urban Technology and Innovation Fund, which will drive the development and market take up of novel, effective and affordable treatment technologies and management approaches; and
 - » Other new initiatives linked to the Queensland Reef and Catchment Water Quality Program and the next phase of the Australian Government's Reefwise Urban program.
- With a review of the Paddock to Reef Integrated Monitoring, Modelling and Reporting Program and the linked Reef Water Quality Report Card, the nature of reporting and assessment under the Urban Stewardship Framework is likely to change.