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National, consistent approach needed in managing Australia's legacy asbestos in water mains

With the cost of dealing with 40,000 kilometres of water mains pipes containing asbestos across Australia expected to significantly rise, a clear nationally consistent approach to managing asbestos in water mains is required.

A new report by the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency (ASEA) examines six cases of rehabilitation of water and sewerage pipes containing asbestos in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia, and identifies best practice for safe and effective management and removal.

The issue is most significant for Victoria, with around 70 per cent of the country's asbestos containing water main pipes.

"Around one quarter of Australia's water main pipes as well as 5000 kilometres of sewer mains contain deteriorating asbestos," ASEA CEO Peter Tighe said.

"While there is no evidence that asbestos in cement pipes is a danger to drinking water, planning for the long term management of asbestos is important for community safety.

"Currently, the cost of rehabilitation of asbestos water pipes is around \$400 million nationally. This cost is expected to rise significantly as the infrastructure ages, and this has implications for water consumers.

"However, there are no nationally consistent regulations around asbestos pipeline programs.

"Water authorities and governments around the countries are encouraged to follow the findings of this report to ensure that planning is in place, and that best practice in removal of legacy asbestos from water mains is followed."

Mr Adam Lovell, Executive Director, Water Services Association of Australia, said "We welcome a nationally consistent approach to managing asbestos cement water mains and increased collaboration and communication between governments, water authorities, industry and customers. Our members across Australia will continue to ensure the health and safety of staff and the public as they manage infrastructure that may contain asbestos".

The Agency recommends governments, water authorities and the industry all work toward the development of a clear set of nationally consistent regulations around practices to remove asbestos from water mains.

Based on the six case studies of asbestos removal from water and sewer mains, the Agency has made best practice findings around:

- ✓ the importance of long term planning to ensure that costs and other issues are factored into water authorities' future plans
- ✓ detailed and sophisticated policies and procedures to manage risk and ensure safety
- ✓ improved communication with the public around disruptions
- ✓ better collaboration between government, water authorities and industry around findings on long term management of asbestos in water pipes

The report, *Case studies of asbestos water pipe management practices*, can be found at:
<http://www.asbestossafety.gov.au/research-publications/case-studies-asbestos-water-pipe-management-practices>

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