

Water Minister's Climate Innovation Challenge - 2026

Future Focused and Sustainable Management of Biosolids

Judging Pack



Water Minister's
climate
innovation
challenge



intelligent
water
networks



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Document Revision Information

Version	Date	Author(s)	Changes
1.0	30/07/2025	Jason Cotton, Isobel Decru	Initial Draft
2.0	18/08/2025	Jason Cotton, Isobel Decru	Draft post review
3.0	21/08/2025		Steerco Approved
4.0	12/11/2025	Laura Parker, DEECA	Updated to reflect 2026 changes
5.0	10/04/2026	Jason Cotton, Isobel Decru	Updated timeline

Overview

In recognition that wastewater treatment and the treatment of solid organic by-products represent a significant portion of the water sector's emissions profile, the 2026 Water Minister's Climate Innovation Challenge (WMCIC) is dedicated towards future focused and sustainable management of biosolids. The 2026 WMCIC builds on the foundations established since 2023, incorporating many of the prior learnings. The WMCIC aims to recognise and promote innovation in the Victorian water sector, supporting climate resilience, collaboration, and the adoption of new solutions to address climate challenges and drive sector-wide transformation.

Submissions for 2026 must relate to investigating and trialling low carbon and circular solutions for better managing biosolids and supporting potential end use markets.

Participants will be invited from across the 18 Victorian water corporations (urban and rural). Collaborative submissions are encouraged however submissions must be led by a Victorian Water Corporation. Submissions selected through a competitive judging process will share in the funding pool of \$320,000. This competitive process attracts quality innovation and third party co-investment in an efficient and targeted way.

Key Dates

Date	Project Phase
13 April 2026	Announcement
22 April 2026	Submissions Open
22 July 2026	Submissions Close
27 July - 5 August 2026	Judging/Shortlisting
10 August 2026	Shortlist Notification
2 September 2026	Final Pitch Event
4 September 2026	Finalists list to the Ministers Office (MO)
30 September 2026	Award Ceremony

Judging Instructions

Judge Selection

The WMCIC judging panel ideally consists of Executive and Senior Leaders from Victorian Water Corporations some members of the judging panel must have subject matter expertise however, the judging panel should consist of members with diverse experiences and points of view. The size of the judging panel is flexible and is dependent upon the number and nature of submissions received. Should an adequately constructed judging panel not be formed from Victorian Water Corporations IWN will expand its selection pool to include national research organisations, associations and water corporations.

Members of the IWN Executive Group, IWN Staff, IWN Program Managers, VicWater Board and current IWN Champions are ineligible to participate in judging.

The WMCIC Steering Committee assigns a judging panel to each submission on the recommendation of the IWN Program Director. Individual judging panel members are selected for their expertise and experience and to ensure the panel represents diversity.

The IWN Program Director will oversee the mechanics of the judging process to:

- recommend the assignment of judges to judge submissions received
- take an overarching view of the submissions and judging process
- provides advice and feedback to the Steering Committee, entrants and judges
- facilitate the resolution of any conflicts of interest or issues that may arise during the judging period
- ensures the judges follow the agreed judging process
- interfaces with the software provider to troubleshoot any issues with the judging software

Judges Role

The judge's role is to review, assess and score the submissions assigned to them, through the AwardForce platform. The judging panel then makes a recommendation to the Minister for Water on which submissions should be awarded funding based on the ranked weighted scoring.

The Minister for Water will make the final decision on all funding awarded considering the judges' recommendations.

The judges may recommend any number of winners according to the merit of the submissions and funding requested.

Judging Process Overview

Judges will each be assigned a number of submissions to review. The assignment of submissions will consider the judges field of expertise and experience, declared actual and perceived conflicts of interest, diversity and inclusion and geography (i.e. regional or metro).

The judging process will be facilitated through the Awardforce platform as per the 2025 judging process.

Key activities and timings:

Date	Activity	Description
1 July 2026	Judge confirmations	Confirmation of Judging panel members. Judges information packs distributed. Confidentiality and Conflict of interest declarations completed.
13 July 2026	Briefing session	A briefing session will be held to cover the judging process, governance and probity, and the submission assessment process prior to initial judging period. The session will be recorded for later reference.
22 - 27 July 2026	Judging Stage 1 – Eligibility (Review by IWN)	Submissions will be reviewed by IWN to confirm they comply with entry requirements
27 July - 5 August 2026	Judging Stage 2 – Shortlisting	Eligible submissions will be scored using a weighted system against a set of approved criteria. Not all

		judges will assess every submission; instead, judges will be allocated submissions to judge as outlined above. The highest-scoring submissions will be considered the shortlisted finalists.
2 September 2026	Judging Stage 3 - Final Pitch Judging	Final judging will be based on a live pitch, with judges attending only their allocated sessions to avoid conflicts of interest. A conferral meeting will be held immediately after the pitch event to finalise scores and agree the funding recommendations to the Minister for Water.
4 September 2026	Judges Recommendations to the Water Minister (to be completed by IWN)	IWN will document the judging panel's recommendations and submitted them to the Minister for Water for endorsement.
30 September 2026	Award Ceremony	Announcement of the winners of the 2026 WMCIC.

*Final dates contingent approval from Minister's Office

All shortlisted submissions will have the opportunity to review the judges Stage 2 feedback and be permitted to address that feedback to strengthen and build on their submission prior to Stage 3 judging. All finalists will receive individual coaching to improve their submissions ready for final judging.

Confidentiality and conflict of interest

All judges must complete a **Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Declaration** before reviewing submissions.

- **Confidentiality:** Judges must treat all submissions as strictly confidential and may not share or discuss them outside the assessment process.
- **Conflict of Interest:** Judges must declare any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts (e.g., professional or personal links to an applicant).
- **Allocation of Submissions:** Assessments are allocated in line with declared conflicts. Judges will only review submissions where no conflict exists.
- **Platform Safeguards:** The **Award Force platform** restricts access so that judges can only view the submissions they are formally assigned. They cannot access or review any other submissions.
- **Pitch Judging:** The same principles and safeguards apply during the pitch judging process, with conflicts managed and judging assignments allocated accordingly.
- **Ongoing Disclosure:** Any new conflicts identified during the process must be declared immediately, and submissions will be reassigned.

This process safeguards the independence, fairness, and integrity of the Challenge assessment process.

Assessment Criteria

Criteria	Weighting	Scoring Guide (1–5)	Guidance for Judges
AC1. Emission transition Outcomes	30%	1 = No clear climate benefit 5 = Moderate benefit with limited evidence 10 = Strong, measurable climate impact aligned with DEECA objectives	Does the proposal clearly define a future focused and sustainable biosolids management system and quantify its impact on emissions? Has a systems thinking approach to emissions reduction been used in and is it aligned with DEECA's Water sector Emissions transition plan?
AC2. Future focused and Sustainable	30%	1 = Short-term or limited scalability 5 = Some potential for long-term impact 10 = Strong potential for sector-wide adoption and longevity	Can the solution be scaled across the sector? Is it sustainable beyond initial funding? Does this provide a long-term solution to biosolids management?
AC3.Capability and capacity to deliver the project	20%	1 = Limited team experience or unclear delivery plan 5 = Adequate capability and planning 10 = Strong team with clear milestones and delivery strategy	Does the team have the skills, partnerships, and planning to deliver the project successfully? Does the team have the capacity and an authorising environment to enable delivery of this project?
AC4.Risk identification and control	20%	1 = Risks not identified or poorly managed 5 = Some risks identified with basic controls 10 = Comprehensive risk assessment with strong mitigation strategies	Are risks clearly identified and managed across safety, environment, regulatory, financial, and reputational domains? Have the risks of not capitalising on the opportunity been considered?

Attachment 1: Submission Form

The following submission form will be integrated into the AwardForce Platform for completion by entrants.

Introduction:

Submissions can be supported by external parties* but the submission must be led and submitted by a Victorian Water Corporation.

Submissions must be made in full and meet the criteria to be evaluated by the judging panel.

Word limits are set as maximums. Concise submissions will be appreciated by the judges.

Submissions must be endorsed by an Executive representative from within the submitting organisation.

Part 1 – Submitting Organisation
Submission title
Submission representative
Organisation
Partnering organisation/s*
Senior Leader endorsement by

Eligibility

Does the project relate to future focused and sustainable management of biosolids¹ in some capacity? Y N

¹ For the purposes of the WMCIC 2026, biosolids is defined as the solid byproduct of wastewater treatment processes

Part 2 – Defining the Opportunity

Q. How will your proposal support future focused and sustainable management of biosolids? (word limit 250) *(This will inform all assessment criteria)*

What is the problem or opportunity? How does it link to Future Focused and Sustainable Management of Biosolids (refer to DEECA definitions in FAQs)

Q. How will your proposal achieve an emissions transition outcome? (word limit 250) *(This will inform AC1)*

What is your solution? How will you deliver the solution? How can the outcome and success be measured? Consider water industry and cross-sectoral climate benefits.

Q. Partners and Stakeholders (word limit 250) *(This will inform AC3)*

Who are the key stakeholders in the solution? Who will you partner with to deliver the solution? What role will the partners play?

Q. Provide Key milestones and dates (word limit 250) *(This will inform AC3)*

Detail the expected timelines for the delivery of the project and key milestones

Q. Budget (word limit 200) *(This will inform AC2 and AC3)*

Detail the budget requirements, how the funding contributes to this budget and, if required, how any additional funding might be sought through co-investment.

Q. Risk & Opportunities evaluation and controls (word limit 250) *(This will inform AC4)*

Detail any risks and / or opportunities and the subsequent controls that are needed to be considered for the development and delivery of the solution proposed including Safety, Environment, Regulatory, Quality, Reputation, Financial, People, others

Q. How will the project outcomes be delivered, scaled, improved and maintained across the water sector? (word limit 250) *(This will inform AC2)*

What is the big picture impact of the solution and how transferrable is it across the water sector? How will you share knowledge?