

DEBT RECOVERY POLICY			
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<p style="text-align: center;">This document is to be reviewed once every Council term years. Next review date: June 2020</p>			
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER		Manager Corporate Services	

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Policy Objective

Riverina Water County Council will operate a consistent, fair, and reasonable process to respond to overdue accounts and recover outstanding payments, both internally and with the assistance of an external debt recovery agency where required.

1.2 Scope of Policy

This policy applies to all parties that owe monies to Riverina Water County Council, including but not limited to water account holders, consumers, and sundry debtors.

1.3 Definitions

- *External Debt Recovery Agent:* An agency and/or law firm engaged by Riverina Water to recover amounts that are overdue.
- *Overdue Bill:* An account that has an amount that is unpaid after the due date specified on the issued bill.
- *Sundry Debtor:* An account raised for goods or services provided separate to Council's potable water supply.
- *Water Flow Restriction "Restriction":* Water flow restriction involves reducing the maximum water supply to the property at the water meter, by inserting a flow restriction device. A small amount of water is supplied for health and hygiene purposes.
- *Water Disconnection "Disconnection":* Disconnection involves stopping the supply of water to the property by removing or locking the meter or disconnecting the service from the main so that supply is no longer available.

Restriction / Disconnection is permitted under regulation 144 of the Local Government (General) Regulation 2005

1.4 Legislative Context

Local Government Act 1993

Local Government (General) Regulation 2005

1.5 Related Documents

Debt Recovery Procedure

Restriction Procedure

Water Billing Follow-Up Procedure

PART 2: POLICY CONTENT

2.1 Principles

Riverina Water County Council is committed to managing revenue to ensure that Riverina Water continues to be a financially sustainable business and service provider.

This policy sets out the responsibilities of Riverina Water and its customers in managing the recovery of outstanding amounts.

2.2 Responsibilities

2.2.1 Riverina Water commits to:

- Issuing accurate, timely bills for goods and services
- Providing adequate timeframes for acknowledging receipt of notices and payment
- Treating customers fairly and with courtesy at all times
- Ensuring that customers maintain access to essential water services whenever possible
- Ensuring that customers have access to payment assistance

2.2.2 Customers are required to:

- Pay their bills promptly
- Advise Riverina Water if they are unable to pay their bills
- Commit to a payment plan, or other payment assistance, once agreed with Riverina Water (and to advise if alternative arrangements or updates to arrangements are required)

2.3 Time Given to Pay Bills

Riverina Water issues water bills to property owners, unless it has previously been arranged in writing that accounts should be directed to managing agents or tenants.

Payment of water accounts is due four weeks from the date of account issue. Payment of sundry debtor accounts is due approximately two weeks from the date of invoice issue.

2.4 Overdue Bills

Riverina Water follows a process when payments are overdue and the property owner has not made contact:

WATER ACCOUNTS:

1. If an account has not been paid by the due date, a **final reminder notice** is sent
2. If the account remains unpaid, a **restriction notice** is sent, and Riverina Water's external debt recovery agent is provided details of outstanding accounts
3. Following this, water supply will be restricted or disconnected by Riverina Water Staff, and a **notice of restriction or disconnection card** will be left at the property.
*Disconnection is at Council's discretion and may be used in situations including, but not limited to, meter tampering, unauthorised removal or damage to a restrictor.
*Vacant properties will be disconnected and left a **notice of restriction or disconnection card**
4. If the bill remains unpaid, Riverina Water reserves the right to commence legal action, which will result in further charges being added to the customer's account

Customers can contact Riverina Water for payment assistance options at any of the above stages. Every bill, notice and letter shows contact information and offers assistance for payment difficulties.

SUNDRY DEBTOR ACCOUNTS:

1. If an invoice has not been paid by the due date, a **statement** is sent at the end of the month
2. If the account remains unpaid, a **final reminder notice** is sent
3. If the account remains unpaid, Riverina Water reserves the right to commence legal action, which will result in further charges being added to the customer's account

2.5 Interest Charges on Overdue Bills

Interest will be charged on water accounts at the current maximum rate set by the NSW Office of Local Government.

2.6 Water Flow Restriction / Disconnection

Riverina Water will only restrict or disconnect water supply to a property as a last resort when water accounts are outstanding for an extended period of time, and customers have not contacted Riverina Water to arrange payment assistance.

Riverina Water will give reasonable warning before restriction or disconnection is arranged, and will leave a **notice of restriction or disconnection card** when restriction or disconnection is carried out.

Restrictions / disconnections will be undertaken Monday-Thursday, and devices will not be removed outside of business hours.

2.7 Avoiding Restriction / Disconnection

Riverina Water will not restrict or disconnect if a customer:

- Agrees to a payment plan, and meets the commitments of that plan when they are due
- Is arranging payment for overdue bills in conjunction with Riverina Water staff
- Has an existing or outstanding billing complaint with Riverina Water

2.8 Restoring Water Supply

If a property has been restricted, Riverina Water will restore the water supply when:

- The outstanding debt is paid in full, including a "Flow Restriction Device Removal" or "Reconnection" fee as outlined in the current Scheduled Fees & Charges
- A decision is made to restore for compassionate or other reasons, or at Riverina Water's discretion. This may include installation of a higher flow restriction device

2.9 Debt Recovery Action

Where outstanding accounts are not paid, Riverina Water may initiate legal action against the property owner or sundry debtor in conjunction with an external debt recovery agency, the cost of which will be added to the customer's account in accordance with appropriate legislation.

2.10 Payment Assistance

Riverina Water offers payment arrangement assistance to customers experiencing financial difficulties. Riverina Water also offers a "Water Billing Hardship Policy" which can be utilised with agreement of Riverina Water after submission of a Hardship Application. Information is available through contacting Riverina Water's Administration staff or the Riverina Water webpage www.rwcc.nsw.gov.au.

The support available for customers experiencing financial difficulty includes:

- Additional time to pay bills
- Ability to make smaller repayments on an ongoing basis, upon arrangement with Administration staff, based on what can be afforded
- Regular deductions from Centrelink benefits
- Cooperation with community agencies including the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, AngliCare and others who may offer assistance or payment assistance vouchers
- Reduction or waiver of interest charges

Riverina Water encourages customers to ask for help with water bills if required. The customer service team are friendly and respectful, and are trained to work with customers to make arrangements that best suit the customer and Riverina Water.

2.11 Making a Complaint

If customers believe that a bill is incorrect or there is an unresolved dispute with Riverina Water about a bill, they should contact Riverina Water on 02 6922 0608 in the first instance. If a customer feels that Council hasn't adequately responded, matters can be escalated to the Office of Local Government or the Ombudsman..

2.12 Confidentiality

All parties to any arrangement or financial assistance request will respect the need for confidentiality.