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Victorian Low Density Mobile Outdoor Poultry Farm Planning Permit Guidelines – An overview

These guidelines apply to poultry farms that satisfy the following operational criteria:
✓ a maximum of 5,000 chickens for egg production or 10,000 chickens for meat production
✓ a production system based on keeping poultry outdoors in paddocks
✓ a maximum outdoor stocking density of 1,500 birds/hectare
✓ mobile housing and feeding infrastructure that is relocated at least every two weeks
✓ adequate separation from waterways, residential areas and sensitive uses
✓ a nutrient management plan is in place and at least 50% ground cover is maintained

These guidelines apply to the following planning permit applications:
✓ existing low density mobile outdoor poultry farms that do not have a permit
✓ new low density mobile outdoor poultry farms
✓ expansions of existing low density mobile outdoor poultry farms
1. Purpose

The purpose of these Guidelines is to:

- deliver sound environmental performance in the planning and management of low density mobile outdoor poultry farms in Victoria
- protect the surrounding environment and local amenity from adverse impacts
- protect and permit an economically viable, competitive and sustainable poultry industry
- provide a fit-for-purpose planning assessment process for low risk poultry farms.

To achieve these outcomes, these Guidelines:

- set standards for the size, siting, design and management of low density mobile outdoor poultry farms, and
- provide guidance on the preparation, assessment and determination of permit applications through the planning permit system.

These Guidelines provide information and direction to applicants and planners for assessing planning permit applications to establish or modify a low density mobile outdoor poultry farm. They outline what planners should expect in the application, and present key decision guidelines to support assessment of the application.

These Guidelines set out the eligibility requirements for a simplified planning assessment process based on the farms having low environmental and amenity risks.
2. Background

Poultry farms in Victoria

Victoria’s animal industries (including poultry farms) are significant contributors to the Victorian economy. They are major employers in rural and regional Victoria and are Victoria’s largest agricultural industry.

There are a number of different poultry production systems in Victoria ranging from very small farms to large intensive shed based facilities. Poultry can include chickens (broilers for meat production), chickens (egg production), ducks, geese, turkey, quail, squab, emu and ostriches.

Poultry production systems can be broadly classified as indoor or outdoor.

Indoor systems are where poultry live predominantly indoors in sheds.

Outdoor systems are where poultry predominantly live outdoors in paddocks or enclosures.

Broiler farms: A broiler farm is land used to keep broiler chickens for the production of meat. Most farms operate by buying in day-old chickens and growing the birds to production weight. Day-old birds are initially kept in sheds where they are sheltered from the elements, and where they have ready and continuous access to feed and water. In outdoor systems, once birds are old enough, they will be moved to or will have access to the outdoor range area or paddocks. These farms are often referred to as free-range broiler (chicken meat) farms.

Free-range chicken meat farms can vary significantly from very small-scale farms with mobile housing systems (e.g. mobile sheds, shelters or caravans) located in paddocks/pastures to large scale commercial farms with tunnel ventilated sheds, associated infrastructure and outdoor ranges attached to the shed. This Guideline is focused on the small-scale mobile outdoor systems.

Egg farms: An egg farm is land used to keep chickens for the production of eggs. The production cycle starts with the breeding and hatching of day-old chicks (breeding and hatching). Chicks are reared to around 17-20 weeks of age at which point they will be ready to start laying eggs (point of lay). The mature birds (pullets and hens) then commence their productive life. Once birds are old enough, they will be moved to or will have access to the outdoor range area or paddocks. Some poultry farms will incorporate any one or all of these production stages:

- breeding and hatching
- pullet rearing
- egg production.

There are many different layer hen systems including caged, barn and free-range/outdoor. Egg farms can also range from being very small-scale to very large scale commercial farms with tunnel ventilated sheds and associated infrastructure. These Guidelines are focused on the low density mobile outdoor systems.

Some producers describe their poultry farms as ‘free-range’, ‘pastured’ and ‘regenerative’. These terms may describe particular ethical requirements or target markets, for example, those based on specific consumer preferences, that then determine the production practices. Some of these systems also have industry accreditation programs attached to them. These operations are generally still forms of outdoor poultry farms.
3. Scope of these Guidelines

Poultry farms fall under the Animal Production definition in Clause 73.03 of the Victoria Planning Provisions and all Victorian planning schemes.

Animal production is land used to keep or breed farm animals for the production of livestock, eggs, fibre, meat, milk or other animal products.

A poultry farm is land used to keep or breed poultry.

A poultry farm can also include a broiler farm.

These Guidelines apply to a planning permit application for:

• broiler farms for meat production (farm capacity of no more than 10,000 birds)
  
  AND

• poultry farms for chicken egg production (farm capacity of no more than 5,000 birds).

These Guidelines do not apply to:

• broiler farms of more than 10,000 birds

• poultry farms for egg production of more than 5,000 birds

• other poultry species such as ducks, geese, turkey, quail, squab, emu, ostriches etc.

These Guidelines apply to a particular type of low risk outdoor production system: low density mobile outdoor poultry farms.

Low density mobile outdoor poultry farms are a type of outdoor poultry production system which, if well managed, presents very low environmental and amenity risks.

Low density mobile outdoor poultry farms are where, once old enough, poultry live outdoors in paddocks with unfettered foraging opportunities. Stocking densities are kept low and range areas are rested to allow ground cover to be maintained and to restrict the rate of manure nutrient additions to the soil.

Mobile housing is provided to protect poultry in paddocks from the elements (and to lay eggs). Birds may be housed overnight for the protection from predators. Prepared feed is provided, typically in self-feeders. The housing, feeders and watering points are regularly and frequently moved to distribute manure nutrients more evenly.

Low density mobile outdoor poultry farms may also include a (non-mobile) shed for the raising of day-old chicks to the point of being ready to range.
Low density mobile outdoor meat flock

Low density mobile outdoor layer flock
4. Planning permit requirements for poultry farms

In all Victorian planning schemes, a planning permit is required to use and develop land for a poultry farm. A planning permit can be applied for in the following zones:

- Farming Zone
- Rural Activity Zone
- Green Wedge Zone
- Green Wedge A Zone
- Rural Conservation Zone
- Rural Living Zone
- Urban Growth Zone.

The establishment of a new poultry farms, including low density mobile outdoor poultry farms, are prohibited in all other zones.

When is a planning permit required for a low density mobile outdoor poultry farm?

The requirement for a planning permit may apply to any of the following:

- existing low density mobile outdoor poultry farms that do not have a permit and that do not have existing use rights (see Clause 63 of all planning schemes)
- establishing a new low density mobile outdoor poultry farm
- expanding an existing low density mobile outdoor poultry farm to increase its capacity (including increasing size in terms of poultry numbers or adding more poultry production area).

In addition to zone controls, there may be other provisions of a planning scheme (for example, overlays and particular provisions) that have additional planning permit and development requirements, such as approvals to remove native vegetation and works approval. Applicants are encouraged to check with their council about whether other approvals are needed at the planning stage.
5. Threshold requirements for Guidelines

There are four threshold requirements for accessing the simplified planning permit process:

1. **Production system:** The farm must be based on a mobile outdoor production system.

2. **Poultry type:** The farm must be a poultry farm for the production of chicken meat or chicken eggs.

3. **Farm capacity:** The farm capacity must be less than 5,000 chickens (eggs) or less than 10,000 chickens (meat). The capacity of a poultry farm is described as the total number of poultry that will be held on the farm.

4. **Outdoor stocking density:** The outdoor stocking density must be less than 1,500 birds/hectare.

**Farm capacity or size**

Planning permits typically specify a maximum operating capacity that has been approved under the permit. This is described in terms of the total number of poultry.

In this Guideline, the number of poultry refers to all the birds being kept on the farm including roosters, chicks, pullets, broiler chickens or layer hens.

**Outdoor stocking density**

In this Guideline, the stocking density of the land is expressed as number of ranging birds per hectare.

This is calculated as follows:

Stocking density = the maximum number of poultry that are kept outdoors / range area accessible to the poultry (hectares)

The stocking density does not include chicks being raised in housing prior to being old enough to range. The stocking density does not include areas of the property where poultry will not have access.

In most cases, range areas will have a stocking density at or below 1,500 birds/hectare. However, in some cases, farms may use a system where birds are confined in smaller areas with a higher stocking density. The birds and housing are moved frequently and the paddock resting period exceeds the minimum three-month threshold. This is acceptable, providing an equivalent stocking density can be achieved and frequent movement of mobile infrastructure and poultry maintains adequate ground cover.
6. Simplified planning permit assessment for a low density mobile outdoor poultry farm

Applications that are assessed as being low density mobile outdoor poultry farms have simplified requirements for assessment and decision.

Key features of the simplified planning process include:

- clear application requirements
- clear standards to support decisions by the responsible authority
- permit applications are not advertised where certain conditions are met – No Notice
- third parties cannot appeal against the planning decision where certain conditions are met – No Appeal

All other poultry farm operations will be required to follow the normal planning process.
7. What information should be submitted with a permit application?

The following list provides planners with the information they should expect from a low density mobile outdoor poultry farm planning permit application.

**Property Identification Code**
All poultry farms with more than 100 poultry, including low density mobile outdoor poultry farms, must have a Property Identification Code (PIC), that assists with traceability and biosecurity.

**A. Property and locality plan**
A property plan showing:
- property boundaries and dimensions of the site
- paddocks where poultry will be kept
- sheds, including housing used for the raising of young birds prior to them being old enough to range outdoors, or any packing sheds (for egg production if appropriate)
- location of any other farm infrastructure such as feed storage areas
- farm bores, dams and other water supply sources and waterways
- mortality management area
- significant slope and other topographic features, remnant vegetation and areas prone to erosion
- areas prone to flooding
- internal and external roads.

A locality plan showing:
- distances to dwellings in a separate ownership and other sensitive uses (including dwellings under construction or approved by a planning or building permit to be constructed)
- distances to waterways from poultry paddock boundaries
- suitable scale and dimensions.

A suitably scaled and dimensioned property and location plan, including distances, should not require the employment of a consultant or surveyor. It can be developed using readily available resources such as free online mapping programs such as Land Channel. http://www.land.vic.gov.au/

**B. Description of the proposal**
A brief written description that details:
- proposed number of poultry to be kept (including offspring and the number of poultry to be kept across various production stages)
- the production system including:
  - the raising of chicks
  - the range area and number of poultry paddocks
  - management, packing and storage of eggs (for egg farms).
- design of the poultry housing, fencing, feeding and water infrastructure
- design and details of housing for the raising of young birds prior to ranging (if applicable)
- the prepared feed for poultry and where it will be stored
- management of dead birds/spent hens
- a Nutrient Management Plan (NMP) that demonstrates how nutrients will be managed and ground cover maintained
- strategies to minimise the risk of predators, pests, rodents and wild birds
- the planning zones and any overlays applying to the land.
8. Assessment criteria for a low density mobile outdoor poultry farm

This Guideline defines objectives and standards that will guide the assessment of the planning application.

Objectives: An objective describes the desired outcome to be achieved from a proposal. A proposal must meet all of the objectives.

Standards: A standard contains the requirements to meet the objective. A standard is an approach, action, practice or method that permit applicants should incorporate into their development proposal to comply with the objective. Where the proposal meets all the standards, the application is deemed to comply with the objective.

Alternative measures: Circumstances of a particular proposal may provide a need or an opportunity to propose alternative ways of meeting the objectives and standards. The responsible authority may consider an alternative design solution if the applicant can demonstrate that the relevant objectives can still be met with equivalent or superior performance. Responsible authorities should consider proposals that include new technology and innovative approaches if these can be demonstrated to satisfy the objectives of the Guidelines.

The Objectives and Standards should be considered as a whole as many of the approved measures are inter-related.

Objective 1 – Low risk site

The risk of adverse environmental impacts on soils, waterways and surrounds is minimised by appropriate site selection and through a farm layout that avoids areas of risk.

Standard 1.1 Land

• The land used for poultry ranging areas are suitable for growing pastures and maintaining ground cover.

Standard 1.2 Surface waters

• The poultry paddocks and other farm infrastructure are:
  – located above the 1 in 100-year flood level
  – not located in areas impacted by a flood zone, flooding overlay or land subject to inundation overlay.

• The poultry farm is not located within a Special Water Supply Catchment Area.

• The boundaries of the poultry paddocks are at least 30m from a waterway declared under the Water Act 1989.

Note: Where this measure cannot be met, additional consideration in the proposal may be needed to address potential risks to waterways and propose additional risk management strategies. Small farms or applications proposing low stocking densities may pose very low risk to the waterways depending on the site-specific farm’s layout, the topography and other considerations, and the application can be supported. Referral to the relevant water authority or catchment management authority will assist with this consideration.
Objective 2 – Environmental protection management

Adverse impacts on soils, waterways and surrounds are avoided through good management.

**Standard 2.1 Ground cover**
- A minimum 50% ground cover is maintained over the poultry range areas at all times (see Appendix A for consideration of seasonal conditions).

**Standard 2.2 Mobile infrastructure**
- Housing, feeding and water infrastructure are relocated at least every two weeks to ensure nutrient load is evenly spread, ground cover is replenished and birds access fresh range areas.

**Standard 2.3 No return period**
- Poultry do not return to a previously used poultry range area within a 3-month period.

**Standard 2.4 Nutrient Management Plan**
- An NMP that includes strategies and measures to ensure nutrient risks are adequately managed and monitored by:
  - maintaining 50% ground cover
  - moving mobile infrastructure and managing excess manure under housing (if appropriate)
  - implementing a no return period and pasture management
  - soil testing, monitoring and farm management.

Refer to Appendix A for additional information regarding Nutrient Management Plans.

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Objective 3 – Community amenity

The site location, design and farm management of the low density mobile outdoor poultry farm protects the community from odour, dust and other amenity impacts.

**Standard 3.1 Separation Distances**

The nearest poultry paddock boundary and poultry housing\(^1\) meets the separation distances listed in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poultry Numbers</th>
<th>Distance to Sensitive Use(^2) (m)</th>
<th>Distance to Residential zone (m)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≤ 1,000 poultry</td>
<td>&gt; 50m</td>
<td>&gt; 200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 1,000 poultry</td>
<td>&gt; 100m</td>
<td>&gt; 400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 including poultry sheds used for the raising of young birds prior to them being old enough to range

2 Sensitive use is a use that involves the presence of people, causing the use to be sensitive to amenity considerations such as odour, dust and noise. Sensitive uses (also referred in other documents as sensitive land uses) include a dwelling, a dependant persons unit, a residential building, a hospital, a school, a day care centre, a caravan park and other uses involving the presence of people for an extended period. Sensitive use does not include recreational areas such as parks and sporting facilities.
A good aim is to have more than 50% ground cover in a poultry paddock immediately after the flock has been removed.
Pasture that has recovered well after a 3-month rest period

Mobile layer chicken caravan with a 1,000 bird capacity

Mobile broiler chicken housing
9. Notice and review of applications

Giving of notice involves the formal notification of the application to other parties. Generally, when notice is given, parties have a right to apply to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal for a review of the decision.

In some instances, proposals are exempt from notice and review under the Victoria Planning Provisions.

Clause 53.09 of the Victoria Planning Provisions and all planning schemes exempts low density mobile outdoor poultry farms from notice and review if the following criteria apply:

- the number of chickens does not exceed 5,000 for egg production or 10,000 for meat production
- the outdoor stocking density does not exceed 1,500 birds per hectare
- the mature chickens are kept outdoors on paddocks with:
  - mobile housing and feeding infrastructure that is relocated at least every two weeks, and
  - the poultry range area maintains a minimum of 50% ground cover.
- the setback requirements of Standard 3.1 are met.

Applications that meet the specified criteria will still require a planning permit, but because they are considered to pose very low environmental and amenity risks, the notice and review requirements will not apply.

10. Referring applications

Clause 66.02 of the Victoria Planning Provisions and all planning schemes requires an application to be referred to the relevant water board or water supply authority if the low density mobile outdoor poultry farm is proposed within a Special Water Supply Catchment Area listed in Schedule 5 of the Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994 and which provides water to a domestic supply.

Referral of an application to the relevant water or catchment management authority may also be required in certain zones and overlays in accordance with Clause 66.03 of the Victoria Planning Provisions and all planning schemes.
11. Decision guidelines for assessing a low density mobile outdoor poultry farm planning permit application

Before deciding on an application for a low density mobile outdoor poultry farm, the responsible authority should consider, as appropriate:

• documentation submitted with the application
• compliance with the Objectives and Standards of Section 8.

If a low density mobile outdoor poultry farm meets the siting and management criteria set out in Section 8 it will pose low risk to the amenity and environment.

Appendix A provides additional information for applicants and planners to support the development and consideration of a proposal and the nutrient management plan.

12. Model permit conditions

Permit conditions will also assist the responsible authority to ensure a farm continues to meet specific standards is managed in a satisfactory manner. Recommended model permit conditions are detailed in Appendix B.
13. Additional information

**Property Identification Code**
Further information of PICs and how to apply for a PIC can be found on the Agriculture Victoria website.


**Biosecurity**
Biosecurity is a set of measures or practices designed to protect against the entry spread of pests and diseases. Effective biosecurity is important for the benefit of the farm operation and the industry as a whole.

Effective biosecurity is achieved through a combination of measures, including separating intensive livestock farms where this is possible. Separation between neighbouring poultry farms is one way to limit the risk of aerosol disease spread, although this may be impractical for existing poultry farms. Good biosecurity management is the first and best approach to mitigate biosecurity risks. Agriculture Victoria can provide advice on considerations for new farm applications in proximity to existing large intensive or sensitive poultry facilities.

Further information on Victorian Biosecurity Guidelines for poultry producers can be found on the Agriculture Victoria website:


Other key industry documents that will assist farmers develop and implement effective biosecurity plans are:


Appendix A: Additional guidance for applicants and planners in the development and assessment of proposals

1. Site selection
Site selection is an important element of avoiding amenity and environmental impacts. The main factors to consider are:
- slope, distance to waterways, potential for flooding
- any statutory land use planning restrictions
- availability of sufficient pasture land area to accommodate the number of poultry proposed
- meeting required separation distances to sensitive uses, residential zones and waterways
- any possible future expansion plans.

Site selection will consider balancing ideal conditions for birds while minimising nutrient impact to the environment. Ideal soils are suitable for growing pastures/crops, and the landscape will have low erosion risk by being not too steep. Features that accelerate runoff, such as drains or gullies need to be managed in range areas.

2. Buffer distances from waterways
Buffers between the poultry paddock boundary and waterways help to prevent nutrient transfers in runoff or eroded soil. Nutrients and salts leaching through the soil profile can also impact the quality of groundwater. The poultry paddock should be well separated from surface watercourses (such as rivers, creeks and dams) to prevent contamination of water with sediment, nutrients and organic matter.

3. Separation distances from sensitive uses and locations
Low density mobile outdoor poultry farms pose a low risk of odour impact due to the low stocking densities and outdoor nature of the production system. This Guidelines sets a recommended separation distance between the boundary of the poultry paddock and sensitive uses (such as dwellings) and residential zones to ensure there are no acute odour, noise or visual impacts.

4. Poultry farm design, operation and management

Nutrient Management Plan – Guidance Notes
A Nutrient Management Plan (NMP) is required to ensure the risk of excess nutrients is managed and monitored. The plan should comprise evidence of the following elements:
- maintenance of 50% ground cover
- mobile infrastructure relocation and management of excess manure under housing (if appropriate)
- no return period and pasture management
- soil test records and farm management details.

Maintenance of ground cover
Maintaining pasture cover is key to farm sustainability and avoiding dust and odour nuisances to neighbours and off-site pollution. Maintaining pasture reduces the risk of erosion, dust and impacts to water quality. A well-managed pasture provides an opportunity to retain and use the nutrients from the poultry on site and avoid the problems of leeching excess nutrients running off into waterways, ground water or onto neighbouring properties. Low stocking levels and frequent rotations allow nutrient loads to be responsibly managed.

Ground cover is the amount of plant material (dead or alive) which covers the soil surface. It is usually expressed in percentage terms – 100% ground cover means that the soil cannot be seen and 0% ground cover is bare soil.

What is 50% ground cover?
50% ground cover is estimated as an average cover across the paddock that the poultry are housed in at the end of the poultry phase in that paddock. This is not an estimate of ground cover across the whole farm, or across other poultry paddocks.

Seasonal and emergency conditions may impact on a farm’s ability to maintain good ground cover. These situations should be treated as being short-term occurrences and the producer should actively manage poultry so pasture growth is restored as soon as possible.

Guidance materials are provided at the Agriculture Victoria website to help farmers estimate and record ground cover. Management practices that would support maintaining 50% ground cover include:

- choosing suitable sites
- careful selection of grass species
- light stocking densities
- frequent paddock rotation
- mobile infrastructure that is frequently relocated
- appropriate size paddocks based on stocking density and rotation frequency.

The NMP should describe how ground cover will be monitored over time and how issues with maintaining ground cover will be managed if they arise.

Movement of mobile housing and feeders within paddocks
Key to the design of a low density mobile outdoor poultry farm is that the housing, feeding and water infrastructure must be mobile. Poultry kept in paddocks exhibit distinct dunging patterns, with most manure being deposited in the high use area beneath the mobile housing. As a result, the soil in this area of the paddock has higher nutrient levels than other areas. Paddocks and facilities (such as housing, feeding/watering points) need careful management to avoid uncontrolled environment and amenity impacts.

Regularly moving the infrastructure (housing/feeding/water) effectively disperses manure nutrients over the paddock area, reducing nutrient concentration and soil erosion around the paddock infrastructure.

As poultry roost overnight in the mobile housing, manure and the nutrients it contains can become concentrated under the housing in each location. For larger housing systems, the manure should be removed and used at another site. The NMP needs to describe how the mobile feeders, housing and water will be relocated around paddocks at least every two weeks.

‘No return’ period and pasture management
This specifically means that once poultry have left a poultry paddock (or area of a paddock) they cannot return to that same area for a minimum period of three months. This is to allow the pasture to recover and actively grow. A minimum no return period of three months is required for all poultry paddocks.

Soil Testing
Soil testing of representative poultry management areas needs to be conducted every two years. Records of the soil tests need to be kept confirming that the soil nutrients are being maintained at a suitable level.

The NMP should describe the areas to be soil tested (similar soil type, poultry class, stocking density, management practice) and how the results will be used to monitor and adjust farm practice.


Farm management: Mortality management
In any livestock production system, some mortalities are inevitable. The appropriate management of mortalities can prevent contamination to surface and ground water, nuisance odour, the spread of infectious disease and problems with vermin. Various methods for disposing of mortalities include composting, burial, rendering and complete incineration. Removal by a licenced contractor is optimum for mortality management, otherwise composting or rendering is best for on-farm. On-farm carcass disposal must meet the EPA Farm Waste Management guidelines for Dead Stock.

Mortalities should be removed daily to minimise the spread of disease, uncontrolled movement of nutrient and the potential production of odour. Further details on the management of mortalities can be found in Ausvetplan (2011).


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Appendix B: Model permit conditions

Use must not be altered

- The use [and/or development] as shown on the endorsed plans must not be altered without the written consent of the responsible authority. The endorsed plans include:
  - Property plan [dates/details]
  - Locality plan [dates/details]
  - Nutrient Management Plan [dates/details]
  - [Other plans - dates/details]

- No more than (specify number) poultry may be kept on the site at any one time unless with the written consent of the responsible authority. All poultry must be kept within the defined area as shown on the endorsed plan.

Amenity

- The use and development must be managed in accordance with the approved plans so that the amenity of the area is not detrimentally affected, through the:
  - processes carried out on the land
  - transportation of livestock, materials, good or commodities to or from the land
  - the emission of odour, dust, noise, artificial light, waste water or waste products
  - the presence of vermin
  - others as appropriate.

- If the responsible authority determines that the amenity of the nearby residents is adversely affected by the emission of an unreasonable level of odour, dust, or noise from the site, the operator must immediately and to the satisfaction of the responsible authority take action to prevent those emissions, which may include adjusting stocking density, greater separation distances between the poultry and residents, or any other actions reasonably required to rectify the unreasonable emissions.

Waste management

- The waste produced from the use must:
  - not discharge beyond the boundaries of the land or directly into waterways
  - to the satisfaction of the responsible authority.

- Effluent run-off must not be discharged to the (insert name of waterway) at any time. All effluent must be treated on site in accordance with the relevant EPA requirements.