

VicSport Update

Impact of Water Shortage on Access to Sport Fields

There is no doubt we are about to reach a major crisis point in terms of the enormous impact the drought conditions will have on the capacity of sports who use grass and water-based synthetic pitches in the coming months. Already a number of LGA's have cancelled winter sport pre-season training options and are further assessing pitches with a view to possibly closing access until further notice. The reality is if we do not have significant rainfall to refill major catchment areas in the next few months, access to many, and possibly the majority, of these venues will be severely restricted, if not cancelled altogether.

For some months now VicSport has been involved in discussions with a range of groups regarding access to playing fields including the Department of Sport and Recreation, the Municipal Association of Victoria, Local Government Authorities, environmental sustainability groups and major water providers to consider possible options. Being optimists we are all hoping significant rainfall in the very near future will render this issue null and void. In the unfortunate event that it does not rain however, both councils who are the primary owners of fields and pitches, and clubs as the users of these venues should be starting to make contingency plans to deal with restricted access to fields.

There are two competing primary issues for consideration to face when deciding on use of fields – preservation of the surface and player safety. Firstly, in regards to preservation of the surface, feedback from LGA's indicates turf on many of their pitches, particularly those with summer grasses, is dying. Once this grass dies off entirely, there is no alternative but to repatriate the surface, a time consuming and very costly process. LGA's are therefore erring on the side of caution when it comes to closing grassed playing areas in the hope they can keep the grass from dying off entirely. This may mean councils may opt to close some fields which sports themselves would consider still safe for use.

To assist with keeping fields open for use as long as possible VicSport recommends SSA's and sports clubs work together with their local Council to develop appropriate strategies. This may mean limiting on field training sessions, using only rubber soled shoes rather than sprigged boots for training and play, limiting length of seasons, sharing of fields and moving training sessions and/or some games, for example juniors competitions, to other surfaces, such as sand-based synthetic pitches or indoor venues if available. Given the number of sports teams wishing to access fields already outstrips demand, limiting field use will only make this a more difficult issue to deal with. Successfully maintaining some level of competition for all users will require groups working together and considering the needs of others.

Should the current drought conditions continue there is no doubt decisions on field closures will need to be made on the grounds of safety. Ground closure decision-making is an issue all clubs and State Sport Associations should be considering very carefully mainly due to impact it has on duty of care and potential liability.

Any group providing participation opportunities for individuals have a duty of care to ensure all reasonable steps are taken to ensure safe playing or training conditions. This includes ensuring the playing surface is safe for play or training. Who will actually decide when a field is safe for play at this stage is not clearly defined. I have had some feedback which indicates LGA's have been advised to pass the decision on to the clubs to make, while other councils are indicating they have set in place a range of surface measures and will make the decision based on outcomes of these measures.

Regardless of how the decision to play or not to play is made, and who makes it, the primary consideration has to be to ensure the surface is safe for play. As the grounds continue to dry to dry out and harden sports should be considering safety options particularly for training, and also possibly for play. This may involve modification of training and play to non-tackling alternatives, such as touch or tag options, discouraging diving and sliding for balls and wearing of protective equipment where possible. There is no doubt the harder, drier surfaces will increase the risks of some types of injuries. In light of this VicSport recommends organisations once again thoroughly review their insurance policies to ensure there are no unexpected implications or exceptions which may impact on personal injury or other relevant cover.

VicSport has spoken with JLT insurance who provide cover for some of the bigger sporting groups in Victoria and have been advised their insurance underwriter does not feel the current drought and the associated playing conditions will in any way affect the cover they provide for their insured groups. VicSport strongly advises your organisation seek specific advice from your own insurer regarding the implications for this specific issue.

VicSport is continuing to work with relevant stakeholders to discuss options for ongoing use of outdoor fields. We are working with Federal, State and Local government to encourage provision of further funding to implement longer term strategies, however this does not assist us with the potential impact on the coming winter season if we do not have rain in the near future.

Whilst we all hope we will have significant rain in the near future, should this not be the case we encourage all SSA's and their member groups who rely on outdoor fields for their training and play, to start considering alternative strategies now. VicSport will continue to keep you updated on relevant information as it comes to hand.

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