

Victorian water businesses – response to coronavirus

Public report – covering data to 30 May 2021

As part of the Essential Services Commission's role in administering the customer protection framework in Victoria's water sector, we began collecting data in April 2020 on the support provided to customers to track the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. This data reflects the extent of support provided to customers who are having difficulty paying their water bills. We are also regularly interviewing water businesses to better understand the support measures they have implemented and the actions they are taking to support their customers.

This report provides a summary of weekly data collected from water businesses since the week ending 26 April 2020. Note we do not audit the data provided by water businesses.

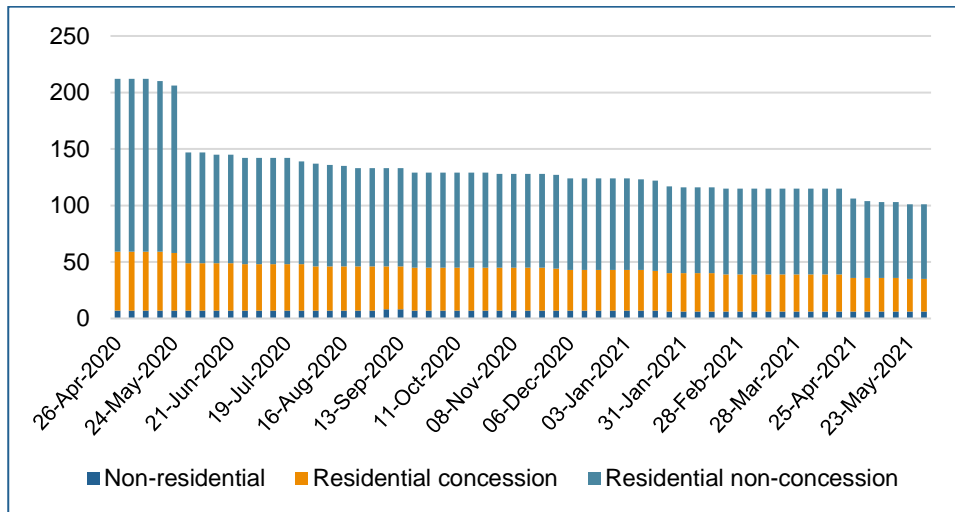
Key Insights

- **Last week we released a retrospective report marking 12 months since we began collecting weekly data, and reporting on the water sector's response to support customers throughout the coronavirus pandemic.** This report included comparisons of the level of support customers accessed from individual water businesses in April 2021 and the change in the level of support accessed from May 2020 to April 2021. As such we did not release an end of month public report at the end of April. This report will include comparisons of the level of support customers accessed at the end of May compared to the end of April.
- **Victoria's water businesses continue to provide additional support to customers during the pandemic.** Water businesses have been proactive in reaching out to customers, including small business and other non-residential customers, to ensure they are aware of existing support programs as well as new support measures developed in response to the pandemic.
- **More customers applied for government Utility Relief Grants during May compared to April.** The average weekly application rate was 474 in May, up from 391 in April. In the past month there was a peak of 512 weekly applications and a low of 403 applications.
- **The weekly number of metropolitan customers awarded hardship grants has increased in May compared to April.** On average 214 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in May, 50 higher than the April average and 44 more than the pre-pandemic norm of 170. In regional Victoria the May weekly average was 452, 17 more than the April weekly average and over six times the pre-pandemic norm (about 75 grants awarded per week).

- **The number of metropolitan customers on water business hardship programs has decreased, falling by 171 (0.8 per cent) from 20,684 at the end of April to 20,513 at the end of April.** In regional areas, the figure at the end of May was 6,069 compared to 6,058 at the end of April.
- **Water businesses have generally stopped restricting customers' water supply and initiating legal action for non-payment of bills since at least late April.** At the end of May, 101 customers across the state still have their supply restricted, three fewer than at the end of April.

Number of customer water restrictions in place at end of week

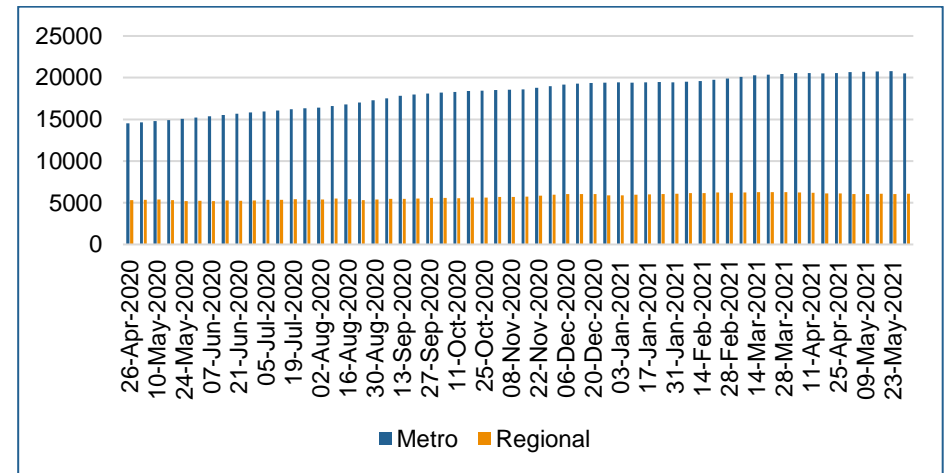
Past month (industry total):



- A total of 101 customers had water supply restrictions in place at the end of May, representing a decrease of three since the end of April. The number of water supply restrictions in place has gradually decreased since reporting started in April 2020, when the number of restrictions in place was 212.
- 66 residential non-concession customers, 29 residential concession customers and 6 non-residential customers currently have their water supply restricted.

Number of customers in hardship programs at end of week

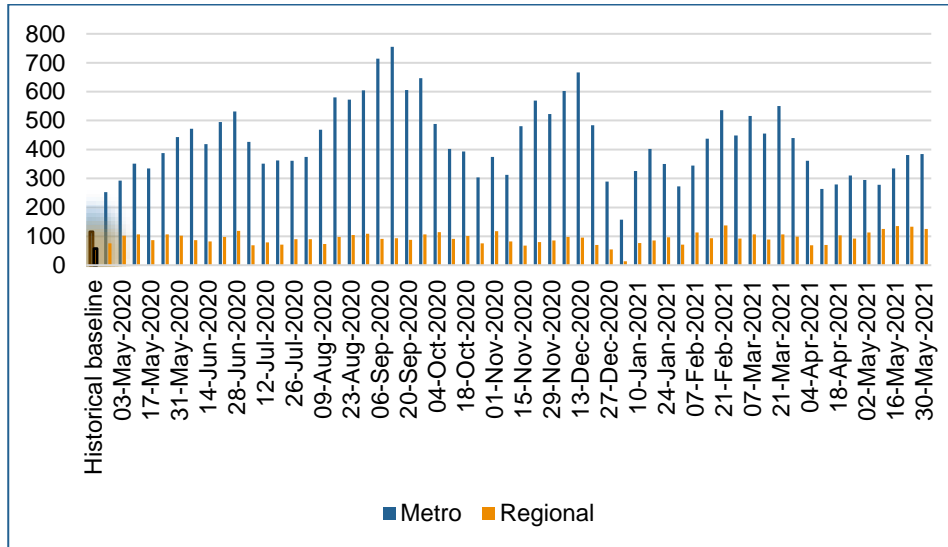
Past month (industry total):



- The total number of customers in hardship programs fell by 160 (0.6 per cent) in May, bringing the total to 26,582. This is about 0.9 per cent of Victoria's over 2.9 million water customers.
- The number of metropolitan customers on hardship programs decreased by 171 customers (0.8 per cent) from 20,684 at the end of April to 20,513 at the end of May.
- In regional areas, the number was 6,069 at the end of May, 11 more customers than at the end of April.
- On average, 439 customers entered and 479 exited water business hardship programs each week in May.

Number of utility relief grants applied for during week

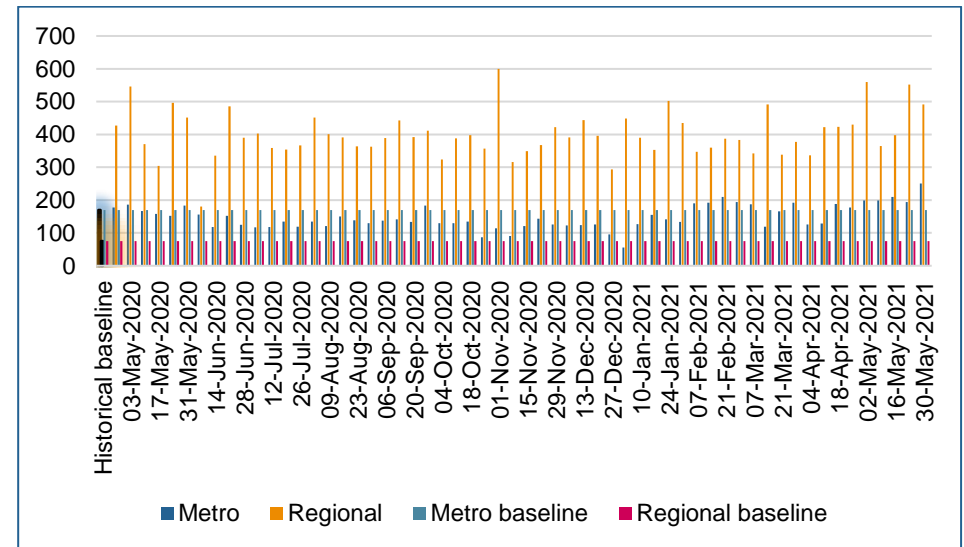
Past month (industry total):



- The weekly average for state government utility relief grant applications in May was 474, an increase from the April average of 391. In the past month there was a peak of 512 weekly applications and a low of 403 applications.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the average weekly application rate for May was just under three times the historical average. We have observed that the number of metropolitan customers applying for utility relief grant applications has been spiking roughly every three months – this trend is being driven by one metropolitan water retailer and aligns with its quarterly billing cycle.
- In regional Victoria, the average weekly application rate in May was over twice the historical average.

Number of customers receiving hardship grants during week

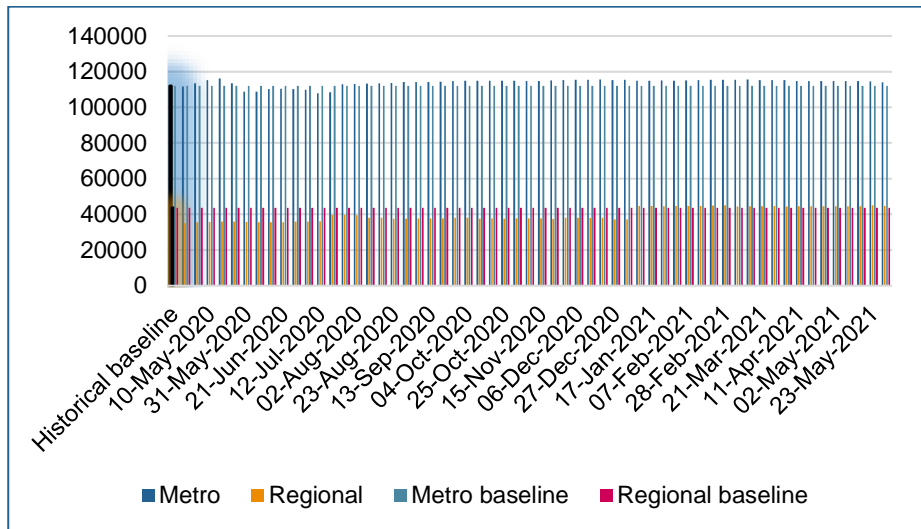
Past month (industry total):



- The May weekly average of 665 customers awarded hardship grants is higher than the April weekly average of 598 customers.
- In metropolitan Victoria, the weekly average for May was 214 grants, 50 more grants than the April weekly average, and 44 more than the historical weekly average of 170 grants.
- In regional Victoria, the weekly average for May was 452 grants, 17 more grants than the April weekly average, and over six times the historical weekly average of 75 grants.

Number of payment instalment plans in place at end of week

Past month (industry total): slightly 



- There were 158,797 customers on payment instalment plans at the end of May, a decrease of 485 (0.3 per cent) compared to the end of April.

About the data: Data is reported weekly by water businesses and is not audited by the commission. We are collecting a small subset of the annual data that is included in our annual water performance report. Definitions of the performance indicators we collect are available on our website at www.esc.vic.gov.au/water-performance-reports.

The historical baseline included in some of the charts above shows a typical weekly figure for that measure, which we calculated using available data reported to us in previous years as part of normal annual performance reporting. These baselines can be considered as pre-pandemic norms and serve as a comparison to the current weekly reported data.