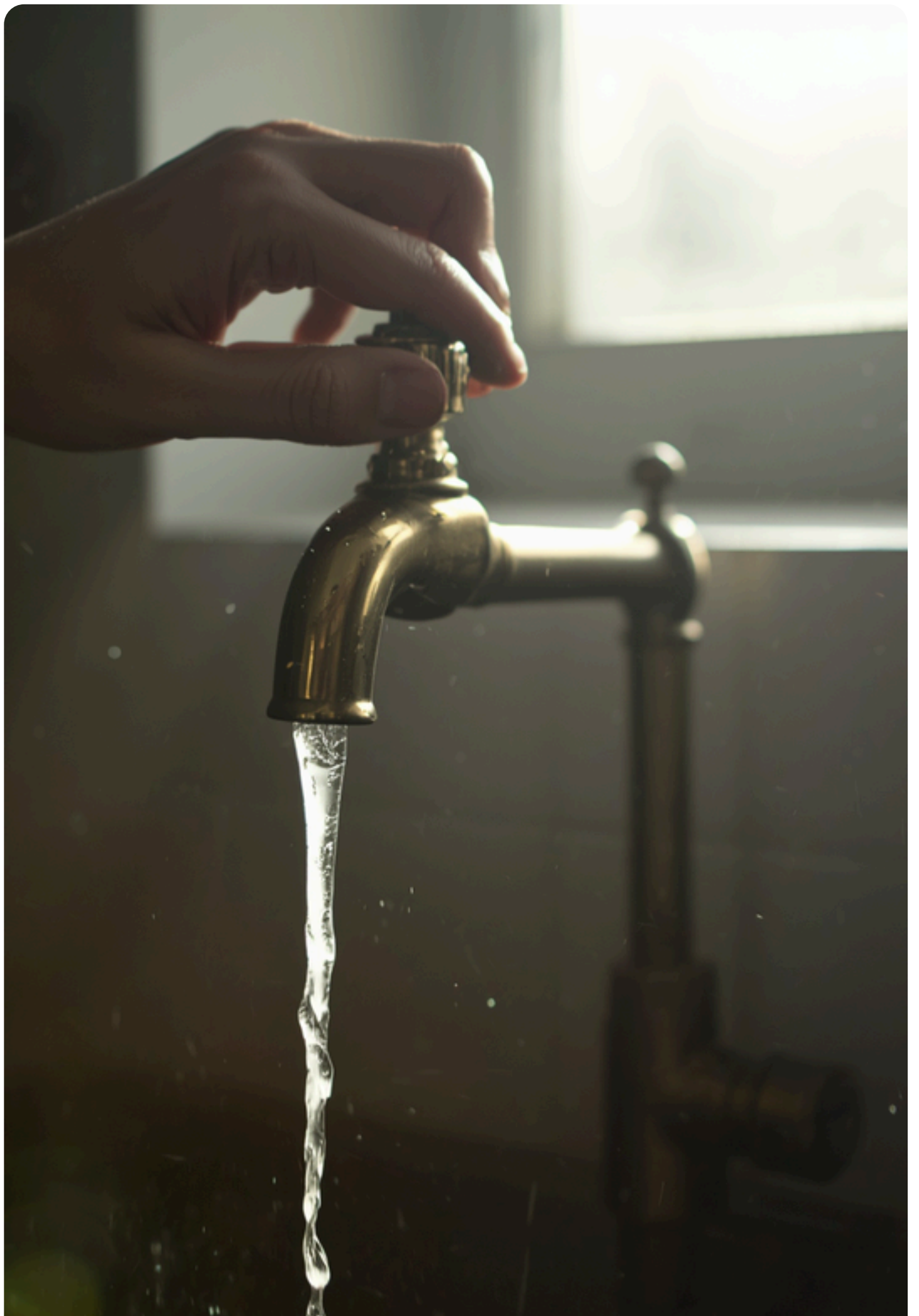


# Weathering the Dry

How ready are Australian  
households for a drier summer?

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 2026

[thewaterconservancy.org/research](http://thewaterconservancy.org/research)



# Are Australians ready for what's coming?

Australia is heading into what could be the strongest El Niño on record. And this year, water literacy has gone backwards, not forwards.

Ask people how they're doing, and the answer sounds reassuring. Ask what they've actually done about it, and a different picture appears.

**Almost six in ten Australians believe they're already doing enough to save water.**

**Yet fewer than half have made the simplest changes available to them.**

Only 48% have fitted a water-saving showerhead or tap aerator. Just 42% have added mulch to their garden beds, a cost-effective way to keep soil moist for longer.

The numbers that track real understanding have also slipped since last year. More Australians now wrongly believe rain means there's no drought, up from 17% to 22%.

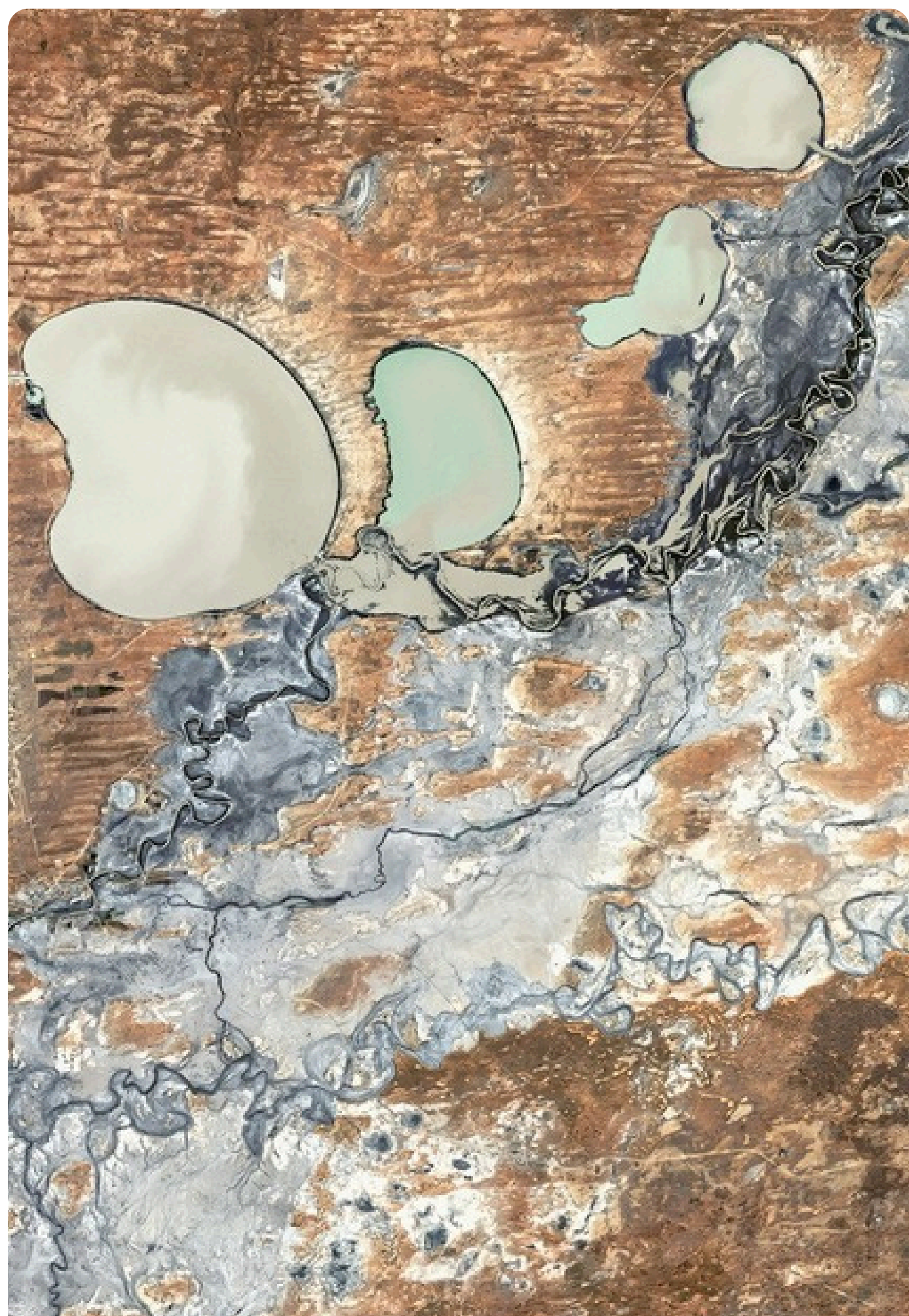
Fewer recognise how seriously drought affects rural communities, down from 77% to 68%, or the environment and wildlife, down from 68% to 58%.

Look closer and these beliefs do not match the reality for the average Australian.

Few of us actually know how much water we use in a day, and fewer still could say with any confidence what a super El Niño means for the months ahead.

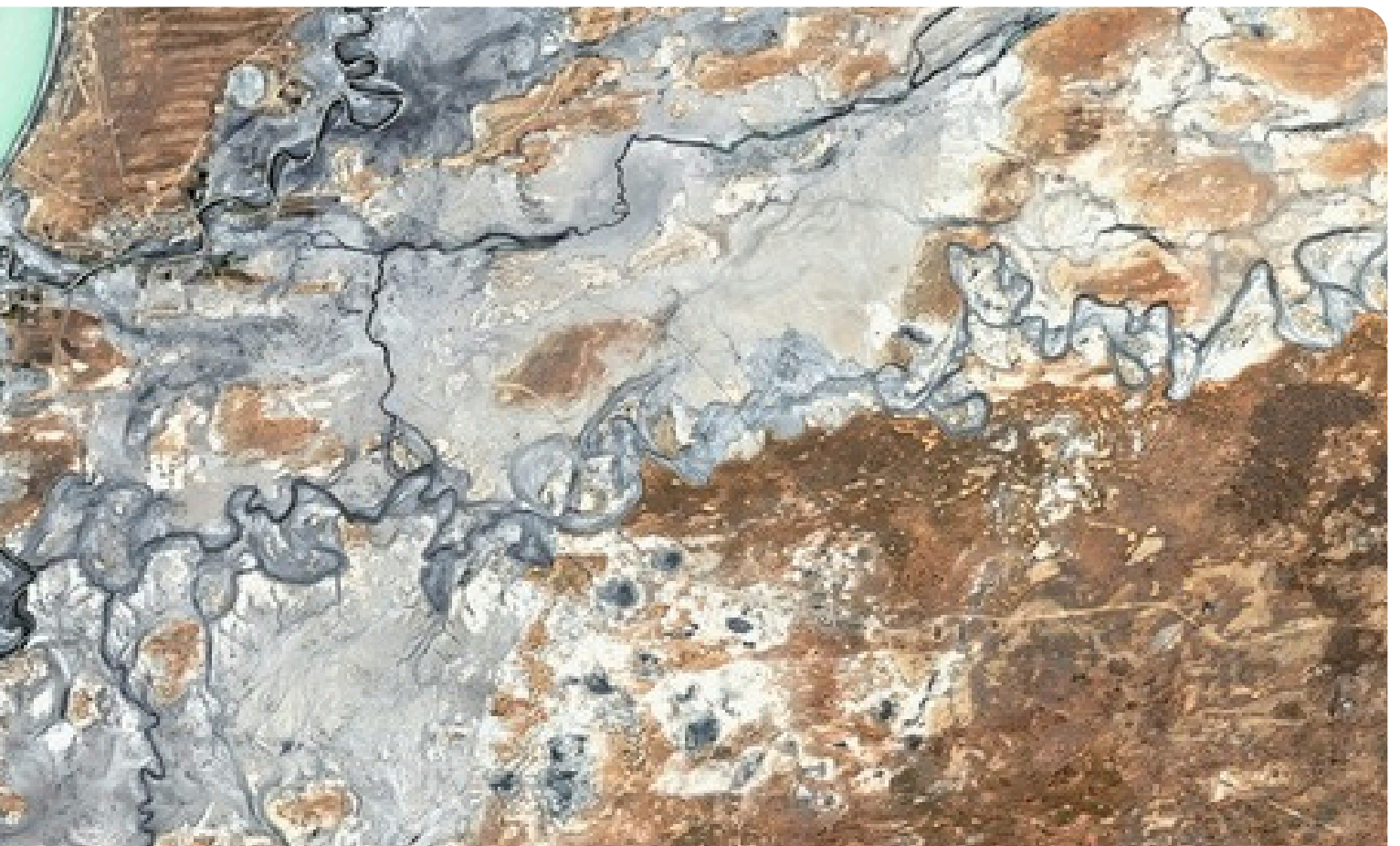
That gap in knowledge also runs deeper for some generations than others. It shows up less in how much people say they care, since younger Australians are as concerned about climate change as anyone, and more in what they've had to live through. Older Australians grew up with water restrictions, with buckets by the shower and hand-me-down warnings about the tap. Younger households, for the most part, haven't had that experience yet, and it shows in the habits they've built.

## Confidence is outpacing understanding



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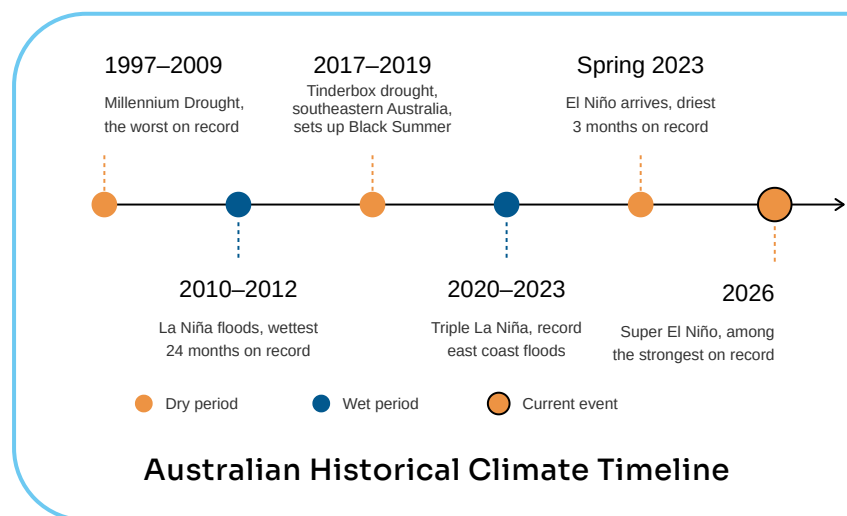
# What is a super El Niño, and why does it matter now?

El Niño is a shift in Pacific Ocean temperatures that happens every few years. When it arrives, it usually brings hotter, drier conditions to much of Australia.

A super El Niño is simply a stronger version of the same pattern, one that pushes the weather further from normal than usual. The Bureau of Meteorology describes this one as a strong El Niño that is still strengthening. Its models forecast central Pacific ocean temperatures to peak in late spring or summer, at levels above the warmest recorded since reliable records began in 1950, and expect the event to last into autumn 2027.

In practice, El Niño years often bring less rain and higher temperatures through spring, and can raise the risk of heatwaves and hotter days in summer. The Bureau notes that no two events play out the same way, and that a strong El Niño doesn't always mean strong effects in Australia. Whatever the weather does, it lands on top of the water habits Australian households already have.

Australia has swung between drought and flood for most of the past thirty years. The Millennium Drought, the worst on record for south-eastern Australia, ran from 1997 to 2009 and brought years of water restrictions before the wettest 24-month period on record ended it in 2010 to 2012.



Dry conditions returned from 2017 to 2019 with the infamous Tinderbox drought. 2019 was southeastern Australia's driest year on record, placing much of New South Wales under extreme water stress and setting up the Black Summer bushfires. The drought threatened town water supplies across the state and prompted major emergency measures to secure water for critical human needs.

Three La Niña years in a row then brought record rainfall and flooding to the east coast, before El Niño returned in spring 2023. August to October that year was the driest three-month period Australia has ever recorded.



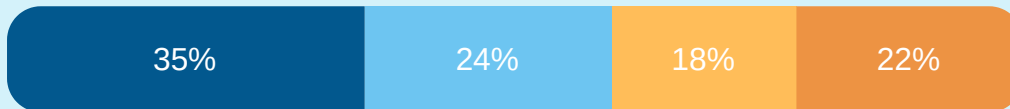
**Only 35% of  
Australians  
currently know what  
a super El Niño is  
and understand  
what it means for  
them. Almost half  
don't recognise the  
term at all.**

El Niño is a problem for water use because most of us use water on autopilot. We turn on the tap, run the shower and water the garden out of routine, without really thinking about it. Few of us have a clear picture of how much we use. In a dry summer, those routines can increase as the weather changes around us. Gardens need more water, and demand rises just as rainfall falls. Each wet spell makes water feel plentiful again, so habits rarely change before the next dry spell arrives.

**Australians who've never lived through restrictions have little reason to question how they use water at home.**

# At a glance:

**35%** know we're in a super El Niño and understand what it means. Nearly half don't recognise the term at all



■ Know it, and understand it  
■ Know it, not sure what it means

■ Don't know it, but know the term  
■ Don't know it, or the term

**50**

Litres a day

What a third of  
Australians  
believe they use



**185**

Litres a day

The median  
an Australian  
actually uses



**48%**

have fitted a water-saving  
showerhead or tap aerator

**58%**

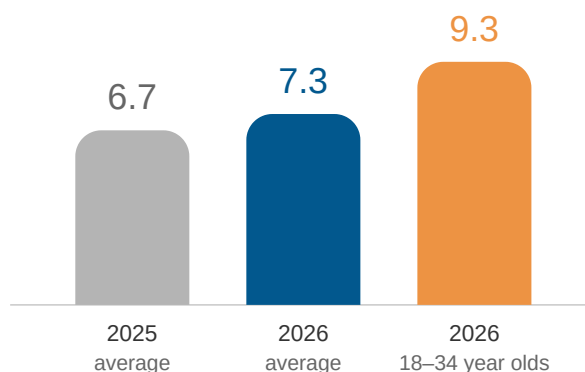
think they're doing  
enough to save water

# The numbers that matter

# 7.3

mins, the average Australian shower length is **increasing**

**9.3 mins, average for Australians aged 18–34**



# 46%

of households who water a garden **increase watering by 30% or more** during hot, dry periods



**30%**  
renters



**54%**  
owners



## Have fitted

water-saving showerheads or tap aerators in their home

# Do we know our own numbers?

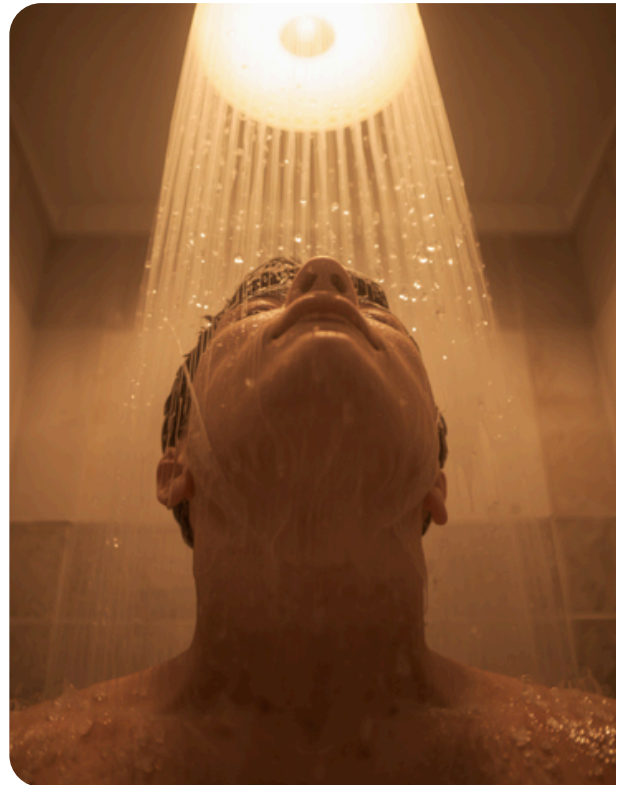
The median Australian uses around 185 litres of water a day, based on national water utility data. Ask Australians to estimate their own use, and the numbers tell a different story.

**Almost a third, 30%, think they personally use less than 50 litres a day, a quarter of the real figure. More than half the country, 57%, is guessing under 100 litres.**

Outdoors, the numbers are directly influenced by the weather. Around four in five Australians, 80%, water a garden or lawn at least occasionally, and almost a third water every day or several times a week.

**Among households that water a garden, 46% say they water at least 30% more often in hot, dry periods, and only 14% say they water no more often than usual.**

The same disconnect shows up in what people have actually done, not just what they think they use. Fitting a water-saving showerhead or tap aerator takes very little time and costs very little, yet only 48% have done it.

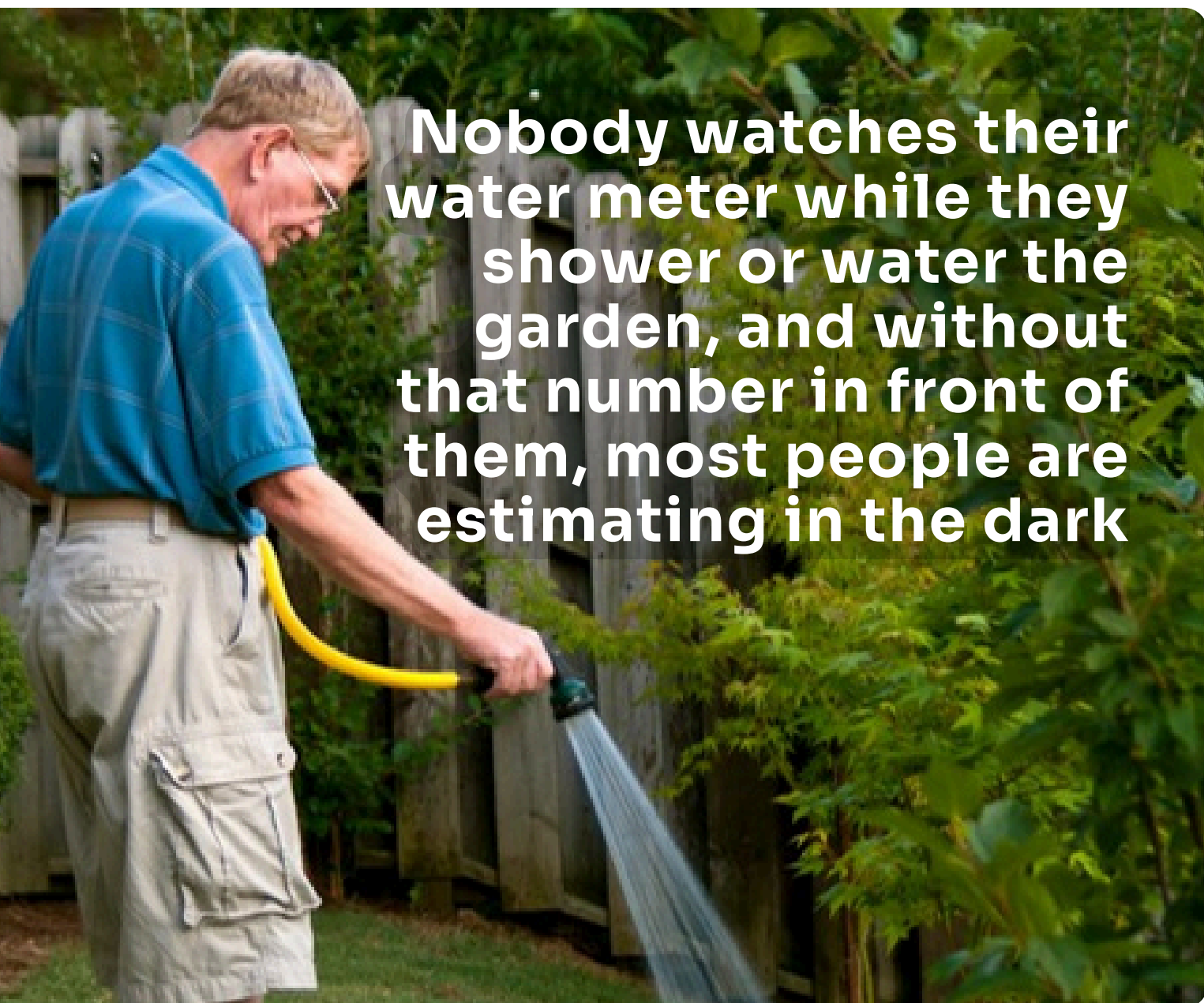


Adding mulch to garden beds is one of the cheapest ways to cut water loss from evaporation, yet more than half of households still haven't got around to it.

None of this points to people who don't care. It points to a set of small jobs that keep slipping down the list, because nothing forces the issue until a dry summer makes it unavoidable.

## Water use is invisible without the right tools

Nobody watches their water meter while they shower or water the garden, and without that number in front of them, most people are estimating in the dark.



**Nobody watches their water meter while they shower or water the garden, and without that number in front of them, most people are estimating in the dark**

## **These labels can help you find the right tools**

### **WELS water rating label**

An Australian Government scheme, found on taps, showers, toilets, washing machines and dishwashers. The stars make comparing products easy: the more stars, the more water efficient.

### **Smart Drop Certified**

A label for products verified by an independent expert panel, managed by The Water Conservancy. The range includes watering, garden, turf, pool, car wash, greywater products and more.



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Ready

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gh

# Who's furthest behind, and why does it matter?

Younger Australians come out behind on most of the measures in this survey. But the reason matters more than the result.

**Among Australians aged 18–34, 29% wrongly believe rain means there's no drought, against 16% of over-55s.**

Only 28% have fitted a water-saving showerhead or tap aerator, against 65% of over-55s. Their showers run longer too, 9.3 minutes on average against 5.5 minutes.

Younger Australians are as concerned about climate change as anyone, with 71% very or somewhat concerned, against 67% nationally. In 2024 they were also more aware of the link between hot water and emissions, with over half of 18 to 24 year olds knowing about it, against 9% of those aged 65 and over.

## The gap comes from experience

Over-55s have lived through water restrictions. They've carried buckets of shower water out to the garden and heard the warnings firsthand. For most people under 35, none of that has happened yet.

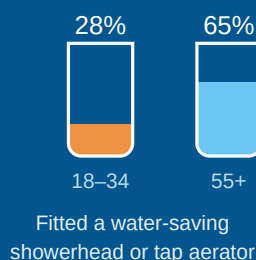
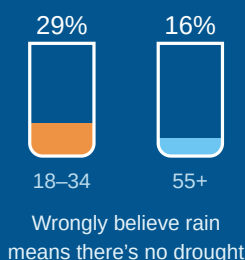
Younger Australians also recognise the gap themselves. 59% aren't sure or don't think they're doing enough to save water, against 30% of over-55s.

The same split appeared in 2024, when 82% of people aged over 65 said they were doing enough, against 48% of 18 to 25 year olds. Over-55s have the better habits, yet they are also more likely to guess their daily use at under 50 litres, 36% against 24% of 18 to 34 year olds.

Habits around water tend to form in response to a reality, such as a dry summer or a high bill. Most younger Australians haven't faced restrictions yet, so the habits haven't formed.

That tends to change with practical lived experience: a first garden to look after, their first bill, or a summer where the tap suddenly matters.

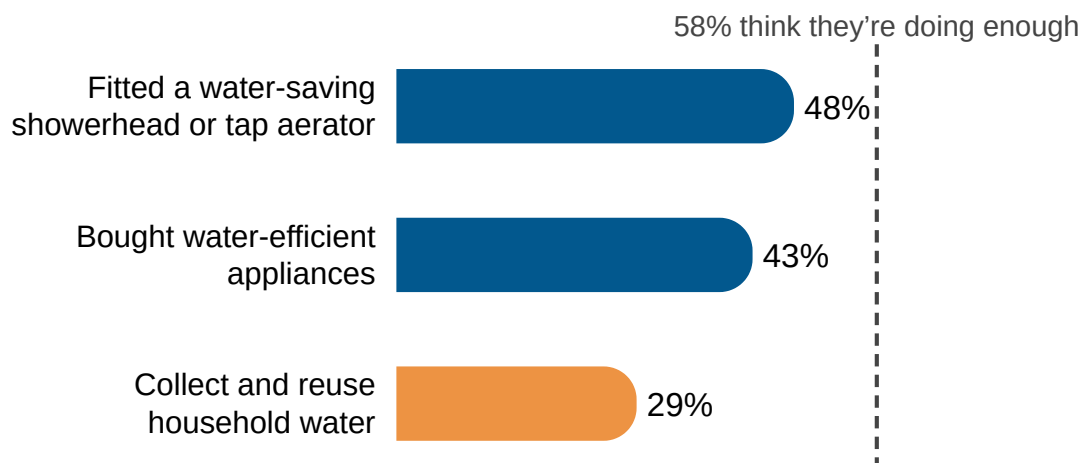
## Experience shapes water habits



# Six years of good intentions, but habits remain

Since the earliest research (Australia's Relationship with Water, TWC 2019), Australians have said that water matters and that they want to save it.

The Water Conservancy has explored this from several angles over the years, including water literacy and awareness, habits that run on autopilot, the gap between attitudes and actions, and the link between hot water and energy use.



**The gap between attitudes and actions**

Across all of them, people's intentions have held steady while their habits have changed slowly.

Yet how Australians see their own efforts has barely moved. In 2019, 54% agreed they were doing all they could to save water. In 2024 and 2025, 59% believed they were saving enough, and in 2026, 58% do.

**This presents a fundamental problem: if we believe we are doing enough when it comes to saving water, we aren't likely to try to do more.**

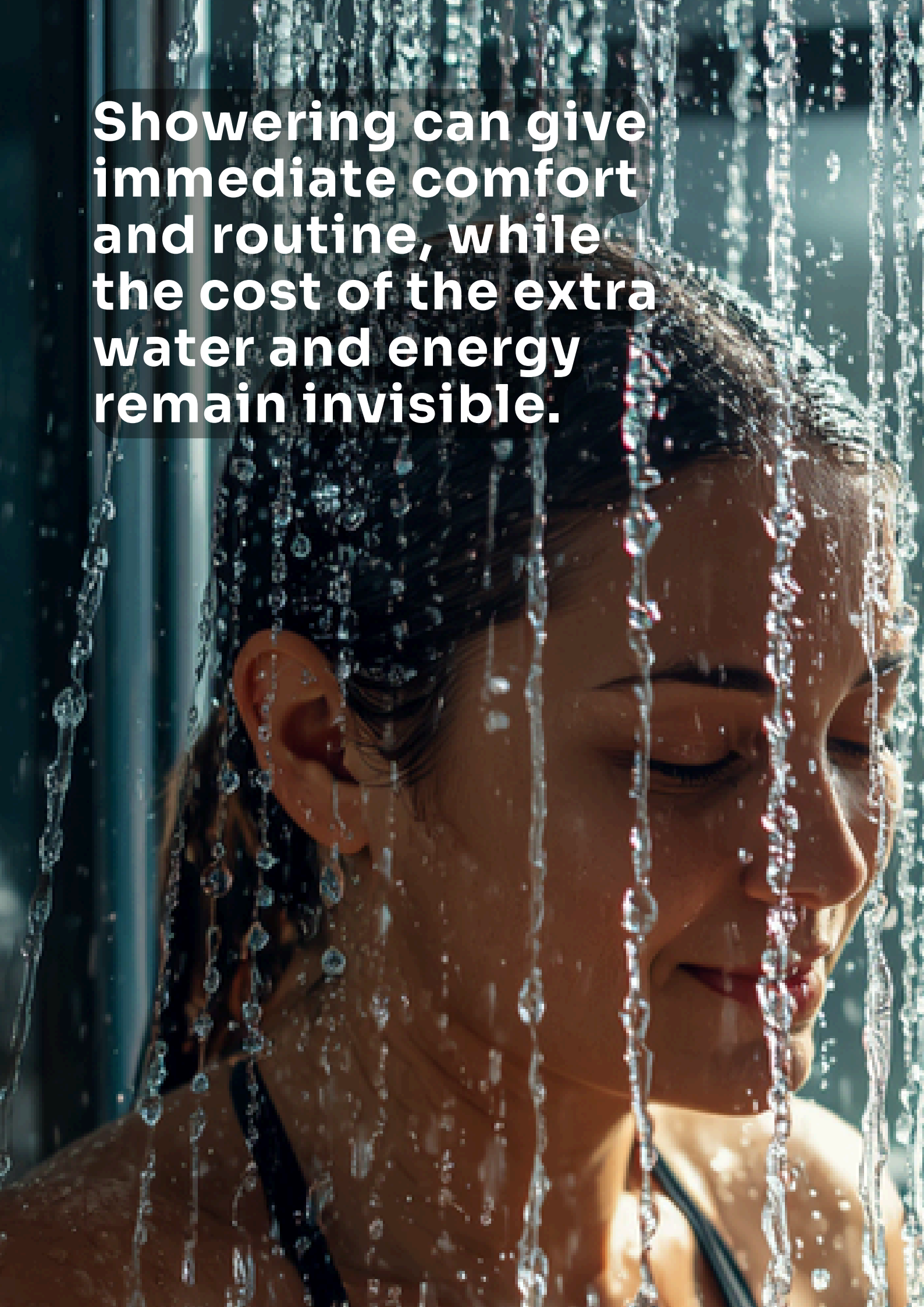
The habits that would make a difference are still not routine for a large part of the population.

Fewer than half of households have fitted a water-saving showerhead or tap aerator (48%) or bought water-efficient appliances (43%). Fewer than three in ten (29%) collect and reuse household water.

The 2025 research found that only 52% of people say they always run a full load in the washing machine. Shorter showers and better-timed garden watering follow the same pattern.



**Showering can give immediate comfort and routine, while the cost of the extra water and energy remain invisible.**



# Where does the water actually go, indoors?

Showering is the habit most Australians point to when asked what uses the most water in the home, and it's also the one people find hardest to give up if restrictions came in.

**The average Australian shower has grown, not shrunk, over the past year.**

Shower times increased from 6.7 minutes in 2015 to 7.3 minutes now. Among 18 to 34 year olds, it's 9.3 minutes, almost four minutes longer than over-55s at 5.5 minutes.

Modern water-saving showerheads can reduce flow without cutting pressure, and have a significant impact in reducing our water use. 48% of households have already fitted a water-saving showerhead or tap aerator.

Buying habits tell a similar story. When choosing appliances that use water, taps, showers, toilets, washing machines, Australians rank water efficiency second only to price.

**Yet almost three in ten, 29%, don't know what the WELS water rating label is, the exact tool meant to help with that decision at the point of purchase.**

**Longer showers also use more energy, because most of the water is heated.**

The 2024 research found that 56% of Australians rarely or never consider the carbon emissions from heating water at home, and 77% did not know that water heating is a major source of household greenhouse gas emissions.

People don't take long showers because they don't understand water conservation. They take long showers because the shower delivers an immediate sense of comfort, relaxation and routine, while the costs of extra water and energy use remain largely invisible.

Increasingly, the shower is no longer just about getting clean. The rise of the "everything shower" trend, where people combine washing, shaving, hair treatments, exfoliation and self-care rituals into a single extended shower, has normalised spending much longer in the bathroom.

The challenge is not awareness. It's that the personal benefits are felt immediately, while the impacts on water and energy use remain largely out of sight.

This helps explain why shower times continue to increase, when we know they should be shorter.

# Where does the water actually go, outdoors?

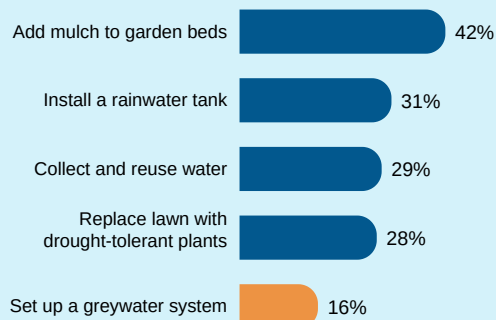
Australians can see a dry summer coming, but many are still responding in ways that **increase water demand.**

As conditions get hotter and drier, garden watering rises, outdoor water use climbs, and households often fall back on familiar habits rather than long-term water-saving solutions. The challenge is not whether people care about water. It's that demand surges at precisely the moment water supplies come under pressure.

More than eight in ten households that water a garden, 86%, expect their outdoor water use to rise in dry periods. 46% water at least 30% more often in hot, dry weather, and one in four (25%) water at least 40% more often. The increase is largest among younger Australians. 59% of 18 to 34 year olds who water a garden water at least 30% more often in hot, dry periods, against 36% of over-55s.

Timing matters because watering during the hottest part of the day means more water is lost to evaporation before it reaches the roots. Younger Australians are 55% more likely to water at these times (midday/afternoon), while 75% over-55s stick to the cooler hours (early morning/evening).

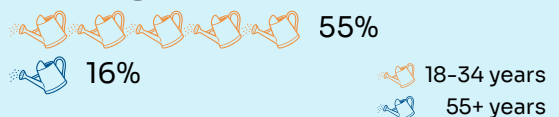
## What households have actually done



## Watering Habits - Cool hours



## Watering Habits - Hot hours



In 2026, few households have changed their gardens or water sources to cope with dry conditions. Mulch is the most common step, at 42%. Around 3 in 10 have a rainwater tank (31%), collect and reuse household water (29%) and 16% have a greywater system.

For the bigger changes, most households have no plans.

Pools and spas add a second outdoor use. 32% of households surveyed have one, and 49% of those aren't covered. About half of pool and spa owners also name topping up as one of their household's three biggest water uses. The findings show strong awareness of the issue, alongside a clear opportunity to reduce evaporation and save water through simple changes to everyday habits.



**46% water at  
least 30% more  
often in hot,  
dry weather**

## **The issues with watering more during dry periods**

- Higher demand when supplies are tightest: Outdoor use rises just as dams and rivers are under the most pressure.
- Evaporation losses: Water applied at midday often evaporates before it reaches the roots. Morning or evening watering avoids this.
- Reduced efficiency: More water doesn't mean healthier plants. Frequent shallow watering weakens root systems, leaving gardens less resilient to drought.
- Rising costs: Water bills climb in hot periods, often without households realising how much more they're using.

# Renters and homeowners

About three in ten Australian households rent their home, and unsurprisingly, renters have not made as many of the water-saving changes this survey asked about.

**30% of renters have fitted a water-saving showerhead or tap aerator, against 54% of homeowners.**

**Mulch shows a similar gap, at 28% against 47%.**

Only 19% of renters have a rainwater tank, against 33 to 37% of homeowners, and just 10% have a greywater system, against 18 to 19%.

Renters are also younger, with 42% aged 18 to 34 against 21% of homeowners, so part of the gap follows the generational pattern earlier in this report.

Outdoor water use is another area where household circumstances can shape what changes are possible. Around four in five Australians (80%) water a garden or lawn at least occasionally, with almost a third doing so every day or several times a week.

**A better approach is for owners and tenants to work together.**



A landlord who fits a water-efficient showerhead or adds mulch to garden beds can improve water efficiency at relatively little cost, while tenants may benefit from lower water and energy use.

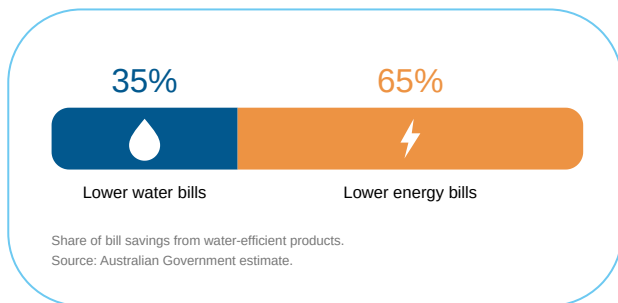
Tenants can also ask their landlord about making these changes, particularly where they could reduce ongoing water and energy use.

**Small, shared decisions** like these can do as much as any tank or system, without needing a renter to own the property first.

# The double win

Cutting hot water use doesn't just save water. It cuts the energy bill that comes with heating it, so a shorter shower or a fixed leak saves money in two places at once, not one.

The Australian Government estimates that 65% of the bill savings from water-efficient products come from lower electricity and gas costs. Less water needs heating. A further 35% savings comes from reduced water use. This matters because of what actually motivates people to change.



This year, when asked what would encourage them to save more water, **63% of Australians put saving money** on bills in their top three, well ahead of helping the environment (36%) and protecting the country's future water supply (33%).

Knowing exactly how much water a household uses was named by 31%, close behind.

A four-minute shower instead of a nine-minute one adds up over a year, both in litres saved and in the gas or electricity no longer used to heat that water.

For a household weighing up whether a change is worth the effort, that second saving, showing up on the energy bill as well as the water bill, can tip the balance.

Seeing the saving on both bills gives households a good reason to stick with the change long after they first made it.





# What actually works?

Three things stand out from this year's research about what actually moves people to change how they use water.



## Money

Money is the clearest motivator, by a wide margin.

63% of Australians name saving money on bills as one of the top three things that would encourage them to save more water, well ahead of helping the environment (36%) or protecting the country's future water supply (33%).



## Usage

Knowing exactly how much water a household uses is named by 31% of Australians as a reason to change, close behind the environment and future water supply.

Most Australians estimate their own use well below the real figure, so seeing the actual number provides a starting point, and the motivation to improve.



## Timing

Timing costs nothing at all. Watering a garden at 6am instead of midday saves water without buying anything or changing how much is used.

Yet more than half of younger Australians who water their garden do it at midday or in the afternoon, the least effective times of day.

Younger Australians are less likely to have taken many of the water-saving steps this survey asked about, but many plan to. 28% of 18 to 34 year olds have fitted a water saving showerhead or tap aerator, against 65% of over-55s. However, among those who haven't yet, 42% of 18 to 34 year olds plan to, compared with 16% of over-55s.

# Conclusion: from awareness to Water Night

Australia is heading into a summer that is predicted to be hotter and drier than usual, and this year's research shows understanding hasn't kept pace with what's coming.

More than half of Australians think they're doing enough to save water. Action, in too many households, hasn't caught up. Most Australians estimate their own water use well below the real figure, and couldn't say with confidence what a super El Niño means for the months ahead. Nearly a third of those who water their garden do it at midday or in the afternoon, when more of the water is lost to evaporation.

Many younger households haven't yet faced a restriction, a dry summer or a high bill, and habits tend to form in response to a reality like these. That leaves a gap between what people believe about their own habits and what's actually true, one that widens or narrows depending on what someone has lived through.

At any age, we can all benefit from reviewing our water awareness and using the tools available to ensure our actions catch up with our intentions.

Water Night asks households to switch off their taps for one evening, from **5–10 PM on Thursday 22 October**, and notice how often they reach for water without thinking. It's a small, shared moment built around a simple idea:

**The habits that are hardest to change are usually the ones we've stopped noticing.**

# WATER NIGHT

# Methodology

**The 2026 survey was conducted online between 14 and 21 September 2026, with a nationally representative sample of 1,012 Australians aged 18 and over.**

Research was carried out by PureProfile, with fieldwork by History Will Be Kind. The indicative margin of error is about  $\pm 3$  points for the full sample. It is larger for the groups compared in this report: about  $\pm 6$  points for 18 to 34 year olds (266 respondents) and renters (259),  $\pm 5$  points for over-55s (385) and  $\pm 4$  points for homeowners (753). Garden-watering questions were asked of the 809 households that water a garden or lawn.

Earlier-year comparisons draw on [The Water Conservancy's research](#) from 2025 (Turning Off The Tap: Inside Australia's Water-Smart Habits, 1,008 Australians) and 2024 (In Hot Water - The Real Impact of Hot Water on Energy Use, 1,005 Australians), and the 2019 report (Australia's Relationship with Water, 2,077 Australians), also published by The Water Conservancy as Smart Approved WaterMark. Some question wording differs between years, so comparisons appear only where the measures are close.

Outdoor figures are self-reported watering frequency, not measured litres, and average shower time is calculated from the minutes respondents reported. The 185 litres per person per day figure is the median residential water use across 78 reporting Australian water utilities, from National Performance Report data. The survey asked respondents only to estimate their own use. Earlier Water Night reports used an average of about 200 litres.

# Appendix

## About the survey

The 2026 survey was conducted online between 14 and 21 September 2026, with a nationally representative sample of 1,012 Australians aged 18 and over. Research was carried out by PureProfile, with fieldwork by History Will Be Kind. Results are unweighted. The margin of error is about  $\pm 3$  points for the full sample, and  $\pm 4$  to  $\pm 6$  points for the age and tenure groups compared in this report. Garden-watering questions were asked of the 809 households that water a garden or lawn.

## How to read the figures

Percentages are rounded. "Top three" questions asked respondents to choose up to three options, so each result shows the share who included that option in their three. Outdoor figures are self-reported watering frequency, and no litres were measured.

## Definitions

- **Super El Niño:** an informal term for a very strong El Niño, a warming of the Pacific Ocean that usually brings less rain and higher temperatures to Australia. At its 15 September 2026 update, the Bureau of Meteorology described the current event as strong and still strengthening.
- **WELS: the Water Efficiency Labelling and Standards scheme,** an Australian Government star rating of up to six stars for products such as taps, showers, toilets, washing machines and dishwashers.
- **Smart Drop Certified:** a certification managed by The Water Conservancy, in which an independent expert panel reviews water efficient products and services.
- **Median:** the middle value when results are ranked from lowest to highest.

### The 185 litres figure

The median residential water use per person per day across 78 reporting Australian water utilities, from National Performance Report data. The survey asked respondents only to estimate their own use. Earlier Water Night reports quoted an average of about 200 litres.

### Comparisons with earlier years

Earlier results come from Smart Approved WaterMark's Australia's Relationship with Water (2019, 2,077 Australians) and The Water Conservancy's research in 2024 (1,005) and 2025 (1,008). Question wording differed between years, so comparisons appear only where the measures are close. Some 2025 comparison figures come from the History Will Be Kind research narrative.

### Sources

Bureau of Meteorology, El Niño: what it means for Australia's climate and ENSO Niño3.4 index ([bom.gov.au](http://bom.gov.au)). Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census, dwelling tenure. Australian Government, Water Rating ([waterrating.gov.au](http://waterrating.gov.au)). The Water Conservancy ([thewaterconservancy.org](http://thewaterconservancy.org)).

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