SERCUL
South East Regional Centre for Urban Landcare

October 2026

Building Site Pollution: A Growing Threat to Waterways

Nimesha Thathsarani, South East Regional Centre for Urban Landcare's Sediment Coordinator, conducting a Construction Specific Litter Measure survey and noting the absence of sediment controls.

Perth's 'world-first' Construction Specific Litter Measure survey highlights urgent need for improved building site management practices

Construction sites can be major sources of pollution when waste, litter, sediment, and liquid materials such as concrete slurry, acid washes, paint, and solvents are not properly managed.

Wind and rain can carry these pollutants into stormwater drains and waterways, harming Perth's iconic Swan and Canning Rivers, tributaries, wetlands and marine environments.

WA leading the way

Western Australia has developed the Construction Specific Litter Measure (CSLM) - the first survey method designed specifically to measure litter and waste from construction sites.

Based on the Australian Litter Measure, as used by the Keep Australia Beautiful Council to monitor litter, the CSLM was adapted to:

- record construction-specific litter types in more detail;
- use survey methods tailored to building sites; and
- collect site information relevant to construction activities.

In November 2025, the South East Regional Centre for Urban Landcare (SERCUL), Perth Natural Resource Management (Perth NRM), Keep Australia Beautiful Council WA (KABC WA) and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) conducted the first round of CSLM surveys, funded by a KABC WA Community Litter Grant and supported by the Sediment and Litter Control and Prevention (SALCAP) Project. These were undertaken in the SALCAP project area, which comprises the South-East Corridor of the Canning River Catchment. A second survey round was conducted between 27 May and 8 June 2026, to gain further insight into littering behaviours on building sites.

Overall, surveyors assessed 151 residential building sites managed by 73 building companies. Key survey findings included:

- Every site surveyed was littered.
- 17,678 litter items were recorded (1612 litter items per 1000m^2).
- Bricks (partial) were the most common item (3392 recorded; 19% of all items).
- 29% of sites were classified as a 'Loose items/ Litter Source Risk'.
- 51% of sites did not have a waste bin.
- Of the sites with bins, 32% had overflowing bins or loose waste.
- Significant quantities of concrete waste and slurry were observed at 36% of sites, suggesting liquid wastes were not being adequately managed.
- Illegal dumping was recorded at 19% of sites.

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Why it matters

- Construction waste can seriously degrade waterways and ecosystem health.
- Concrete slurry, acid washes, and other liquid wastes can alter water chemistry, increase turbidity, and introduce contaminants, that harm aquatic life, vegetation, and water quality.
- Sediment (soil, sand, silt, mud) allowed to leave construction sites was also identified as a significant risk, particularly if contaminated and containing microplastics.

What can the building industry do?

- Keep all litter, waste and building materials appropriately contained on-site.
- Contain and dispose of all packaging and wrapping promptly.
- Use covered bins or waste cages to reduce wind-blown litter and illegal dumping.
- Empty waste bins regularly and prevent overflows.
- Never sweep or hose pollutants into drains.
- Keep roads and public areas clean throughout construction and at handover to prevent pollution and maintain community safety and amenity.

Education: A pollution solution

An education campaign, developed by the SALCAP Project and based on the results of the November 2025 surveys, is underway to promote best-practice waste management and litter disposal behaviours across the construction industry.

As part of SALCAP's Sediment Tools and Resources Kit (STaRK), nine new free resources are available from the SALCAP webpage.

A free End-of-Day Checklist will soon be published to help builders, bricklayers and other trades assess site housekeeping at the end of each day. The checklist will help to identify, secure or dispose of materials and waste that could result in littering, sediment loss or pollution, supporting simple, practical actions that protect local waterways and help the industry 'Do the Right Thing by the River'.

Future opportunities

The CSLM methodology could be further adapted to identify litter source risks and fly-away litter beyond the site survey boundary. It could also be used as a post-construction assessment tool, with surveys conducted after handover to quantify litter and waste remaining on verges and surrounding public areas.

Both options would provide a more complete picture of construction-related pollution and help identify opportunities to further improve site management practices and reduce off-site environmental impacts.

What is SALCAP?

SALCAP works with local governments, state government agencies, industry and the community to reduce sediment and litter entering the stormwater system and improve the health of the Canning River and its tributaries.

The SALCAP project is part of the Cleaning up the Canning initiative funded by the Australian Government's Urban Rivers and Catchments Program, with the support of South East Regional Centre for Urban Landcare (SERCUL), Armadale Gosnells Landcare Group, the City of Armadale, City of Canning, City of Gosnells, Town of Victoria Park, the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation. Additional funding for development of the CSLM survey was provided through the Clean Sites - Clean Waterways Community Litter Grant funded by Keep Australia Beautiful Council WA (KABC WA).

Learn more

CSLM Summary Reports and STaRK:
www.sercul.org.au/cutc/salcap/

Like to run CSLM surveys in your area?
Contact Bronwyn: bronwyn.scallan@dbca.wa.gov.au

Seen littering, sediment run-off or illegal dumping from construction sites?
Report it to your Local Government Authority. Illegal dumping can also be reported via Crime Stoppers WA.