

High water mark could spell end of restrictions

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Melbourne City Council is installing a stormwater tank under Darling Street, East Melbourne which is expected to save 20 million litres of water a year. *Photo: Craig Abraham*

MELBOURNE'S water storage level is at its highest point in 12 years and the Baillieu government yesterday flagged the removal of water restrictions before the end of the year.

Rainfall was about one-third heavier than normal in Melbourne's water catchments over autumn, leaving the city's storage areas at 54.5 per cent full.

While storage levels usually fall by about 5 percentage points over the season, this year's lavish falls have meant storage was boosted 0.3 percentage points, or 6.9 billion litres.

Water Minister Peter Walsh said not only had the extra rain boosted supply but it had left areas around the catchments wet, meaning that water run-offs were also expected to be higher this year than in the recent past.

Years of drought means Melbourne remains on stage 2 water restrictions, banning the watering of lawns with drinking water and the watering of gardens outside set days and hours, despite recent heavy rainfall.

The Bureau of Meteorology has predicted that the recent wet La Nina effect will weaken and weather patterns will return to normal.

Mr Walsh said Melbourne's water authorities were discussing permanent water-saving measures with customers, but he said pending the outcome of this he could see no reason why water restrictions could not be lifted.

"That would be the assumption but I don't want to pre-empt what might happen in November," he said.

Mr Walsh said a key aim of the government's water strategy is to improve stormwater harvesting, pointing to yesterday's launch of a new project in East Melbourne as an example.

The Darling Street project is expected to be completed later this year and will capture around 20 million litres of water - the equivalent of more than 18 Olympic-sized swimming pools - for use on nearby parks and trees.

The water will be diverted from drains in streets adjoining Darling Street before being treated in an underground storage tank, in what is believed to be the first project of its kind.

It is part of a \$7.2 million City of Melbourne water-saving package.