

## Interview with Ricky Bell, Infrastructure & Planning Manager, AFL Victoria

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Ricky Bell, AFL Victoria's Infrastructure and Planning Manager, was one of numerous athletes and sports administrators interviewed by The Climate Institute as part of the [Sport & Climate Impacts: how much heat can sport handle?](#) report released in January 2015.

Bell's interview focused around how the AFL at a regional level responded to drought conditions over the Millennium Drought.

### *How is AFL Victoria adapting to the impacts posed by a more extreme climate?*

The best way to start with that is to go back to 2006-09 in Victoria, and what happened with the significant drought and water restrictions that were associated with that. A lot of grounds within Victoria ... could not be played upon. So in times of crisis, you often find innovation.

Other peak sporting bodies across the world, FIFA as an example, have indicated that they can play their sport on a synthetic grass surface. So at that time we looked at whether it was possible to play Australian football, but also given that majority of ground in Australia ... are shared with cricket, whether we could jointly come up with a synthetic product that you could jointly play footy and cricket on ...

That was I guess the key impetus, the drought and water restrictions in the period and the impact on natural turf grounds in Victoria, and the impact on our sport.

Synthetics are not only about using less water, they are also about washouts. Not so much in Victoria, but certainly in other states, in Sydney it happens a lot where significant weather events and ground are closed.

At a local community level councils are closing grounds to either protect the asset or because of safety issues, or both. So again, synthetics are another way of making sure the competitions can continue rather than be shut off week after week.

### *Are there other examples of adaptive steps to manage future droughts and extreme weather events?*

On the point around adaptation of natural turf grounds, again the drought and water restrictions in the late 2000s period really forced a rethinking of what happens with grass types ...

Prior to that most of the grasses in Victoria were cool season grasses. But as soon as the drought and water restrictions come along, those are the first grounds shut. Probably around 70 per cent of grounds in Victoria were of that type back then, and now it's probably flipped, where 70 per cent now are warm season grass, or a mixture of warm and cool season.

You can cut your water consumption by half or more by converting the grass type.

### *What other steps is the AFL Victoria taking in this space?*

There are significant inroads being made in terms of energy efficiency of ground lighting, whether it's more efficient lights or even going to LED ... We are certainly talking to manufacturers about that and trying to make that as a way forward.

Lighting and ground surfaces are obviously the two key ones, and water use, which is related to ground surfaces.

Probably one of the biggest innovations I think is around water use, and we can't take a lot of credit for that – it's largely been driven by the councils and state government. [They] have invested significantly in water reuse initiatives, whether that's reusing storm water, reusing treated sewerage water and those sorts of things. We know that that's going to help us next time we're in those predicaments.

*The full Sport & Climate Impacts report and associated content such as infographics can be found at [www.climateinstitute.org.au/sport-and-climate.html](http://www.climateinstitute.org.au/sport-and-climate.html)*