



ISO 14046 BRIEFING NOTE

Measuring the impact of water use and promoting efficiency in water management

Background

Sustainability is a priority for consumers, businesses and governments today, many of whom are concerned about excessive demand on limited natural resources and the environmental impacts caused. They are interested to know what action is being taken to minimize this demand, especially in relation to water and climate change.

Current patterns of production and consumption undoubtedly have an impact on the environment, climate change and water resources. Understanding this impact, or “footprint”, is a vital step towards finding strategies to reduce it. In the case of water, this can be achieved by measuring its use and the impact of this use throughout the life-cycles of products, processes and organizations.

A water footprint is determined by one or more metrics that quantify the potential environmental impact on water of a product, process or organization. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is developing the International Standard **ISO 14046, Environmental management – Water footprint – Principles, requirements and guidelines**, which intends to provide decision makers in industry, government and non-governmental organizations with a means to estimate the potential impact of water use and pollution, based on a life-cycle assessment.

Water footprint – A positive influence on trade

Water is a scarce and valuable commodity which, in terms of trade and economics, is sometimes referred to as “blue gold”. Managing it efficiently is key to achieving the common goal of sustainability.

Recognizing the economic and social benefits to trade that International Standards can bring¹⁾, ISO 14046 can have a positive impact by providing a harmonized framework for the quantification and reporting of water footprints.

ISO 14046 has been developed by experts from all over the world, including some from liaison organizations that have worked in the field for a long time.

They recognized that building the technical capacity for assessing water footprint in developing countries would bring about competitive market opportunities. As a result, Sweden and Switzerland have sponsored training and pilot project development in Africa and Latin America respectively, while training programmes have started in important regional hubs such as India, Peru and Botswana in partnership with the United Nations Environmental Programme. These projects not only succeeded in building capacities in water footprint assessment, but also brought valuable experience to the development of ISO 14046.

1) http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/benefitsofstandards/benefits_repository.htm?type=EBS-MS

Benefits of a water footprint assessment

A water footprint assessment can help in:

- assessing the magnitude of potential environmental impacts related to water;
- identifying ways to reduce potential water-related impacts of products at various life-cycle stages, and of processes and organizations;
- facilitating water efficiency and optimization of water management at product, process and organizational levels;
- providing scientifically consistent and reliable information for reporting water footprint results.

Using ISO 14046

The requirements and recommendations given in ISO 14046 provide elements for understanding how water use can be improved by accounting for the volumes used and quantifying scarcity and pollution, as well as other related impacts.

When applying ISO 14046, societal, environmental, legal, cultural, political and organizational diversity should be considered, as well as differences in economic conditions.

ISO 14046 is not intended:

- to be adopted or applied in a manner that results in barriers to trade that contradict World Trade Organization requirements;
- to provide a basis for legal actions, complaints, defences or other claims in any international, domestic or other proceeding;
- to be cited as evidence of the evolution of customary international law;
- for regulatory use.