

South East goes high tech to plug leaks

Ben Woodhead

Victorian utility South East Water has turned to computers to plug leaks faster as its customers in drought stricken Melbourne lose patience with the time taken to patch dripping pipes.

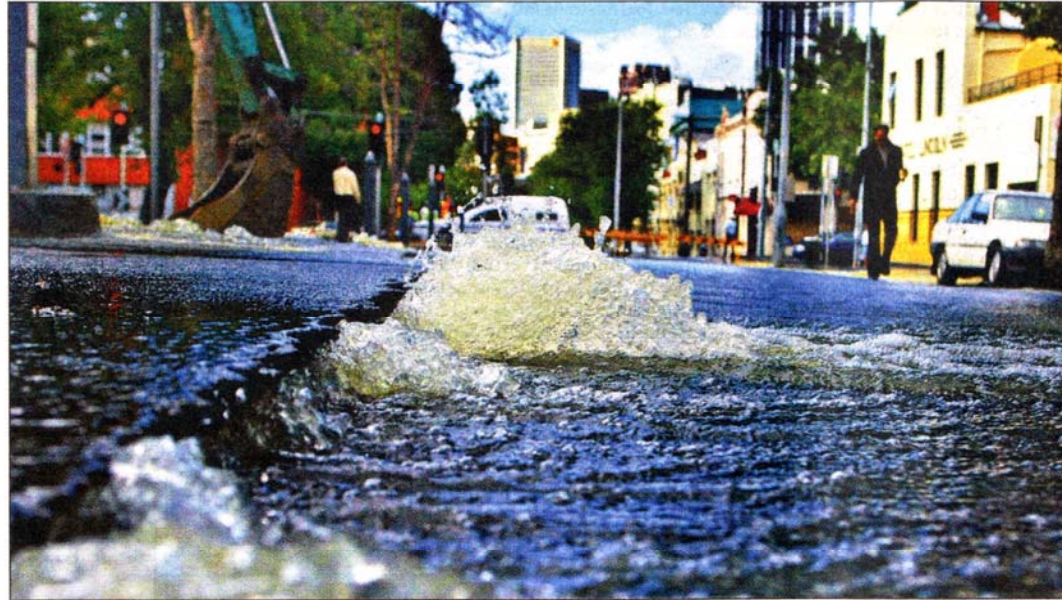
The company is also planning to sell its new-found expertise to utilities in other states and it has already stitched up contracts with Victorian and New Zealand water operators, including a \$15 million a year deal with Auckland's Metrowater.

"Because we're in the drought situation here in Melbourne we realised that customers were no longer going to put up with three days for a response even if it was a small leak or a weep," South East Water executive general manager Kevin Hutchings said.

"We made a call internally that all leaks should be attended (to) within eight hours regardless of its nature and we set a 95 per cent target on that. We're actually hitting 97 per cent."

Mr Hutchings is the head of 'us' Utility Services, which is a joint venture between South East Water, Siemens and Thies that was set up to sell services around South East's Montage computer platform. The platform sits at the centre of the organisation's efforts to clamp down on leaks.

Victorian government-owned South East, which developed Montage in association with Indian outsourcer Infosys, holds a 50 per cent stake in the joint venture while



Public-private pipe patching . . . South East Water, Siemens and Thies jointly find and fix burst mains.

Photo: CRAIG ABRAHAM

a Siemens and Thies consortium controls the other half.

"It's really mixing the public and private capabilities together to get a better outcome," Mr Hutchings said.

"As a consequence of that, we're doing work now for every Victorian water company but we also last year secured the contract for Metrowater in Auckland. So we're about to roll Montage out over there as well."

Montage draws together information from customer data, GPS navigation systems and geospatial

and satellite imagery to enable South East to quickly pinpoint leaks and dispatch cars to customers.

Mr Hutchings said that meant South East was able to dispatch the right type of service vehicle to the site of the leak and readily find pipes and shut-off valves on customers' properties.

All of that adds up to big time savings that are essential as customers grow increasingly intolerant of delays in fixing leaks.

"People are quite emotional

about water," Mr Hutchings said.

Mr Hutchings said that South East and the joint venture are now keen to target utilities in other states as contracts come up, following the early success in picking up business at Victorian utilities and Metrowater in New Zealand.

He acknowledged that competition would be stiff.

"They're usually long contracts, so they don't come up every day and there are a lot of good companies that are bidding for that type of work."