

Information Sheet
12 March 2007

Esperance Bird Deaths

Why have there been bird deaths?

Since December 2006 bird deaths have been reported in the vicinity of Esperance.

Recent testing by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) of a small number of affected birds has shown elevated levels of lead in these birds.

While it is difficult to accurately attribute the source of the lead in the birds, it is possible that there may be a link with the lead carbonate shipping activities at the Esperance Port.

The birds affected so far have been nectar eating birds and so it is likely that they have been exposed to lead dust which has fallen on to plants and flowers upon which they feed.

What is lead carbonate?

Lead carbonate occurs naturally in the environment and is mined at various locations across Australia for the production of lead metal.

Lead carbonate is transported from the Magellan lead mine near Wiluna, Western Australia to the Esperance port for export. It is transported to the port in enclosed containers, however there may be the opportunity for dust to escape when it is being loaded on to ships.

Ingestion (eating) or inhalation of high levels of lead is known to cause health effects. Lead poisoning is quite rare in Australia as a result of lead reduction strategies aimed at reducing the amount of lead in the environment.

Is this likely to have affected my health?

Unless a person has direct contact with and inhales or ingests large quantities of lead containing dust, it is unlikely that they will experience health effects.

The Department of Health is aware that routine blood lead testing of workers at the Esperance Port has been carried out and levels are below the Occupational Health and Safety Guideline.

A small number of community members, including children have had blood tests taken by their medical practitioner which show that their blood lead levels are very low and below the current Australian blood lead guideline.

What should I do to reduce my potential exposure?

Rainwater

Some samples taken from rainwater tanks have shown levels of lead above the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines.

If you use a rainwater tank, the Department of Health recommends that rainwater not be used for drinking water unless it has undergone testing to demonstrate that it meets the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines. If you have concerns about the safety of your rainwater for drinking, contact the Shire of Esperance Environmental Health Branch for advice on 9071 0666.

Further information on the safe use of rainwater tanks is available from your local shire or the Department of Health. Ask for a copy of the enHealth Council brochure titled 'Guidance on the Use of Rainwater Tanks'.

Home grown fruit and vegetables

If you grow your own fruit and vegetables, basic hygiene practices including washing all fruit and vegetables before consumption is adequate to remove any dust that may be on the produce.

Eating outdoors

If you eat outdoors at home or at picnic facilities, basic hygiene practices are adequate to prevent exposure to dust. Always place food on a clean plate or a napkin, never directly on an outdoor surface and always wash your hands after engaging in outdoor activities.

Who should I talk to if I am worried about my health?

If you have concerns about your health, it is recommended that you visit your family GP. Your family GP knows your family's health history and is therefore in the best position to assess your health.

What is being done about the problem?

The Department of Health has recommended that the DEC ensure that appropriate lead dust monitoring is conducted in the Esperance community.

The Department of Health will be waiting on further results from the DEC on dust monitoring to determine if there is the potential for lead dust exposure from the Esperance Port.

The Department of Health will review these monitoring results when they become available.