



Media Statement

26 March 2007

Esperance – initial results

Marine sediment samples collected from the seabed directly under the Esperance Port Authority's discharge pipe have returned very high lead and nickel levels.

Department of Environment and Conservation spokesman Robert Atkins said the levels were of great concern and warranted further sampling and investigation.

The Department's Pollution Response Unit collected six samples of marine sediment over a five square metre plot from under the Esperance Port Authority's discharge pipe two weeks ago.

"The marine samples collected showed lead readings between 3600mg/kg and 29,000mg/kg, which are well above environmental levels," Mr Atkins.

"The environmental levels for lead under Australian guidelines are set between 50mg/kg and 220mg/kg.

"The samples also returned elevated nickel levels, with samples showing readings between 3300mg/kg to 6600mg/kg."

Mr Atkins said environmental levels for nickel were between 21mg/kg and 52mg/kg.

The environmental levels are taken from the *Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality* (2000).

The Department of Fisheries has taken samples of shellfish and other sedentary marine organisms from the area likely to be affected and these will be tested for contamination.

Fisheries Regional Manager Phil Shaw has advised people to avoid the consumption of shellfish, crustaceans or fish taken from the vicinity of the ship loading wharf until their status has been determined.

DEC has directed the Esperance Port Authority to carry out a comprehensive and scientifically structured sediment sampling program to determine the full extent of contamination, as a matter of urgency.

DEC has called on the port to explain how such high levels of nickel and lead had entered the port waters and how they will ensure no further lead or nickel enters the water in the future.

The Department will also immediately conduct further testing to assess the extent of the contamination, in the interests of ensuring the safety of Esperance residents and protecting the marine environment.

DEC continuing its broader environmental investigation in Esperance and any breaches of the Environmental Protection Act may lead to enforcement action.

Interim results taken from hand held meter readings of soil samples indicate some samples in the port and immediately outside the port gate exceeded health investigation levels for lead.

However, sites tested elsewhere around the town, including six primary schools, were all below health investigation levels.

Tests on water bodies taken around Esperance showed lead and nickel levels were below the drinking water guidelines, except for a disused reservoir on the hill behind the Esperance port, where levels were above the drinking water guidelines.

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