



4 March 2007

Media Statement

Esperance lead issue update

Isotope fingerprinting

Isotope testing on samples taken in Esperance have matched the lead in the samples of material transported into and out of the town.

The Department of Environment and Conservation contracted Professor Brian Gulson from Macquarie University to carry out isotopic testing on a range of samples, including livers of lorikeets, soil, water and sediment.

DEC spokesman Robert Atkins said the isotopic testing had provided the Department with important information to further its investigation.

“This information forms part of the investigation into determining the cause of the lead contamination and identifying a source and therefore the report is not being made public at this time,” he said.

“The Department’s priorities are to ensure there is no further lead contamination in Esperance and that appropriate remediation is carried out.”

Isotopic testing provides a “fingerprint” of the lead that is specific to its geological origin.

Lead has four naturally-occurring isotopes which are the end products of radioactive decay of uranium and thorium over time. The presence of particular isotopes identifies unique characteristics of the lead which can be matched to its place of origin.

Swab results

Mr Atkins said results of swabs taken at Esperance properties had found that two out of 124 properties returned lead levels above the US guidelines levels, the standard currently used for trigger levels prompting further investigation.

“The two swabs which returned high lead readings were taken from the outside window area of the two houses,” he said.

“All remaining houses tested came in below those levels.”

Mr Atkins said the levels were assessed under the United States Housing Urban Development guidelines for lead levels on house exteriors.

Mr Atkins said the Department was still waiting for results on the blossom, pigeon and fish testing.

Independent review

Director General Keiran McNamara has announced he will commission an independent accredited auditor to review the Department’s audit and inspection processes for the Esperance port and identify where improvements are needed.

Mr McNamara said the Department was in discussion with the Victorian Environmental Protection Authority to identify an auditor to undertake the review.

The Department's regulatory audit and inspection program aims to detect non-compliance with licence conditions before significant events occur. However, under the Environmental Protection Act 1986, it remains the primary responsibility of people handling hazardous materials to do so in a way that does not cause pollution.

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