

TALKING POINTS - ABC 7.30 request Hillgrove mine

KEY MESSAGES

- Overflows of stormwater from a dam at Straits Hillgrove Gold Mine near Armidale have occurred in August, September and October due to the level of rainfall.
- Monitoring data demonstrates that the overflows have been significantly diluted and the downstream water quality has not been impacted.
- NSW Health has advised the EPA and local residents that it does not consider there to be a risk to public health from the overflow.
- The EPA notified NSW Health, the Premier's Regional Co-ordinator, Kempsey Shire Council and the District Emergency Officers, Department of Trade and Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services and began an investigation into the incidents. NSW Health notified downstream residents and local media.
- The EPA has required Straits to implement measures to reduce the likelihood and volume of overflows from continuing wet weather.
- The EPA is continuing its investigations into the incidents.

RESPONSE TO POINTS RAISED IN ENQUIRY

The impact on health:

- The Office of Environment and Heritage was first notified that stormwater was overflowing from a dam at the Hillgrove Mine (east of Armidale) on Monday 29 August 2011.
- I have been advised that EPA officers notified NSW Health, the Premier's Regional Co-ordinator, Department of Trade and Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services Kempsey Shire Council and District Emergency Officers of the incident and immediately began investigating the incidents.
- The mine site is situated on a very steep hill side and the dam collects rainfall from the processing area, office buildings and car park.
- I have been advised that approximately 0.68 megalitres of overflow from the dams may have entered Bakers creek in total from the flows combined, and these overflows would have been significantly diluted by rain fall runoff into the dam and from runoff into the creek from the catchment. For example I was informed that during the overflow in August

about 37 megalitres of flows from the catchment upstream of the mine would have been entering the creek at the same time. So the overflows from the dam at Hillgrove were significantly diluted.

- Monitoring data confirms this, and because of the significant dilution the downstream water quality has not been impacted.
- NSW Health advised the EPA and local residents that there is no increased risk to public health from these incidents. This advice was included in the letter you refer to. In this letter the NSW Health also advised local residents that water from rivers and dams generally can contain contaminants and should not be used for drinking in its raw state.
- NSW Health will be able to provide more information about communication to residents from NSW Health.

Reports of Dead fish:

- I have been informed that the EPA received a report of six dead fish on 19 September 2011; there was a delay of about 12 days from when the dead fish were reported to the EPA and the time of the fish deaths which made any investigation difficult. The EPA referred this to Department of Primary Industries Fisheries.
- I have also been informed that monitoring data demonstrates that the overflows have been significantly diluted and the downstream water quality has not been impacted. It is very unlikely that the fish deaths occurred because of the overflows.

Community notification:

- Once notified of the incident the EPA notified NSW Health, the Premier's Regional Coordinator, Kempsey Shire Council, Department of Trade and Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services and District Emergency Officers, and began an investigation into the incidents.
- NSW Health notified downstream residents and local media and provided general advice to landholders.
- The EPA has notified NSW Health, Armidale Dumaresq Council and the Kempsey Shire Council of following overflows.
- NSW Health has advised that the downstream background water quality has not changed.
- The EPA has provided information about its investigations to the community and recently distributed a media release with an update on October 12 2011.

Environmental impacts of mining on the Macleay River?

- I am advised that the EPA has instructed Straits to implement measures to reduce the likelihood and volume of overflows from continuing wet weather, including operating a series of evaporators to reduce the water in the stormwater system and I can report that four floating evaporators are in operation and a much larger evaporator is being installed. Straits were also required to immediately take water samples and monitor discharges into the river after each flow.
- Straits has excluded outside water from entering the dam catchment and isolated heavily contaminated materials within the catchment. It has also committed to undertake tests to examine the potential of treating stormwater in the dams to remove contaminants.
- The EPA takes any environmental incident very seriously. It will continue to monitor progress of these measures and will take action if they are not implemented to a satisfactory level.
- These recent incidents have highlighted to me the issue of water quality in the Macleay River. I have been advised that historic mining from more than 100 years ago and erosion of highly mineralised soils in the catchment has deposited a plume of material containing heavy metals in the river system from the Hillgrove area to the Pacific Ocean (approximately 200 km).
- To plan long term management actions and provide a common understanding as a base to develop emergency management and incident response protocols, the EPA and NSW Premiers and Cabinet Regional Coordinators are convening an interagency meeting with NSW government departments and local government.
- Researchers from the UNE have been undertaking research on the sediment and water quality in the Macleay River and they have a lot of insight they can provide. They will be presenting at that meeting.
- The local community will be involved in planning long term management actions and the EPA officers have been talking to the Kempsey Shire Council about this.

INCIDENT TALKING POINTS

- The Office of Environment and Heritage was first notified that stormwater was overflowing from a dam at the Hillgrove Mine (east of Armidale) on Monday 29 August 2011. Overflows have since occurred on 9 -10 September, 2 - 19 October.

- It is estimated that a total volume of approximately 0.68 megalitres of contaminated water may have entered Bakers Creek from the overflows since August 2011.
- I am advised that staff from the Office of Environment and Heritage in Armidale notified NSW Health, the Premier's Regional Co-ordinator, Department of Trade and Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services , Kempsey Council and the appropriate District Emergency Officers and also commenced an investigation into the incident.
- I understand that the mine is currently not operating but is in 'care and maintenance' mode.
- These spills have occurred after prolonged wet weather caused run-off which exceeded the amount of water that could be stored in dams that capture run-off from the mine processing and office areas. ...I am advised that had the mine been operating, stormwater would have been used for mineral processing and the dams would have had the necessary capacity to absorb the extra run-off.
- I am advised that the EPA has instructed Straits to operate a series of evaporators to reduce the water in the stormwater system and I can report that four floating evaporators are in operation.
- Straits were also required to immediately take water samples and monitor discharges into the river after each flow.
- To minimise the possibility of further overflows Straits have committed to installing a much larger evaporator, to be in operation before the end of October 2011.
- Straits have also voluntarily committed to undertake tests to examine the potential treatment of stormwater in the dams to remove contaminants and will also seek to reduce the catchment area and isolate more contaminated material where possible.
- The EPA takes any environment incident very seriously. It will continue to monitor progress of these measures and will take action if they are not implemented to a satisfactory level.

- The EPA and NSW Premiers and Cabinet Regional Coordinators are convening an inter-agency meeting with NSW Health, Department of Planning, Department of Trade and Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services (DTIRIS), Northern Rivers Catchment Management Authority, Kempsey and Armidale Dumaresq Councils and District Emergency Management in November to share information on the health of the Macleay River to provide a common understanding as a base to develop emergency management and incident response protocols and to plan long term management actions.
- Researchers from the UNE have been undertaking research on the water quality in the Macleay River and they will be presenting at the interagency meeting.