

Submission
No 298

**INQUIRY INTO IMPACT OF THE WESTERN HARBOUR
TUNNEL AND BEACHES LINK**

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 18 June 2021

Partially
Confidential

Attention: Parliamentary Inquiry
Re: Objection to the Western Harbour Tunnel

17 June 2021

Dear Chair, Parliamentary Inquiry,

I wish to register my strong opposition to the Western Harbour Tunnel (WFH) construction. My objection is threefold: 1) concern for human and environmental health; 2) projects strengthening Sydney's public transport network should be prioritised for public funds over those which cater primarily to private vehicles; and 3) WHT reports are written in an inaccessible manner and with a lack of transparency.

1) Concern for human and environmental health

Many people swim and fish recreationally in Birchgrove waters, including young children and teenagers, local residents and non-residents who visit Birchgrove to fish and relax (Figure 1). From speaking to some of these recreational fishers, it is evident that some collect their catch without regard for fish species or safe/ legal consumption guidelines. Thus, any elevation in contaminant levels arising from disturbed sediments during WHT construction and thereafter is of serious concern to human health.



Figure 1: Popular fishing spots in Birchgrove include Snail's Bay Jetty, Yurulbin Park and Ballast Point Park (pictured here).

Furthermore, the positive impacts of improving water quality on the inner harbour ecosystem have become evident in recent years. Anecdotally, over the last three-to-four years sightings of sea eagles over Birchgrove are not uncommon, where previously they were not seen. I take sightings of apex predators in the inner harbour as a positive sign for the improving health of the local ecosystem. I am concerned that disturbing toxic sediments in the process of the WHT construction, which have the potential to react with each other and amplify negative impacts, will set us back years in terms of water quality and ecosystem health. This in turn may have knock-on effects to human health or restrict safe recreational activities in Sydney Harbour.

The environmental impact statement and subsequent submissions report essentially ignored concerns raised by members of the public about disturbing toxic sediments. These concerns are justified as is demonstrated through a recent Sydney Morning Herald

Article

(<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/harbour-sludge-to-be-dug-up-for-new-tunnel-contains-alarming-levels-of-toxins-20210212-p5721z.html>).

2) Projects focusing on improving Sydney’s public transport network should be prioritised over those which cater primarily to private traffic.

It is clear that as Sydney’s population grows and as we approach a tipping point in global carbon emissions that Sydney must place far greater emphasis on public transport, providing incentives for taking public transport and disincentives for driving private vehicles. The WHT will be more heavily used by private than public traffic and thus is not the project most deserving of public funding. Instead of building new roads which cater to private traffic, I suggest investing in improving public transport options for Sydney residents: strengthening the rail network by adding additional lines, allocating more bus lanes throughout and between our Sydney CBDs, increasing ferry services and providing safe cycle lanes. My commute from Birchgrove to my workplace in Parramatta is close to 1.5 hours each way, yet via WestConnex this commute would be reduced to 35 minutes. It is frustrating that those of us who do not own cars or avoid driving for environmental reasons do not benefit from these tax-payer funded infrastructure projects. The WHT does not have a strong business case, underscored by the fact that the business case was never provided to the public and this needs to be reexamined in light of Covid-19.

3) The report is written in an inaccessible manner and lacks transparency (Term of reference J)

The WHT EIA is written in an unnecessarily lengthy and inaccessible manner, which seems likely to disempower many people from reading and understanding the project and its potential implications for human and environmental health. As an example of the report’s lack of transparency I would cite the difficulty of finding detail on heavy metal contamination. The main chapter (*Ch 17: Hydrodynamics and water quality*) refers only to ‘High levels of heavy metals’ in general and does not specify specific contaminants or contaminated sites.

Table B.1 Contaminant compounds exceeding the nominated criteria at sediment sample locations

Location	Compound	ISGC (high)	ISGC (low)	NAGD	NEPM EIL
WHT					
B108WA_VC-A	PAH		x		
B111WA_VC-A	TBT		x	x	
	Heavy Metals		x		x
	Mercury	x			
	Lead	x			
	Silver	x			
	Zinc	x			x
B111W_VC-B	PAH		x		
	TBT		x		
	Heavy Metals		x		x
	Mercury	x			
	Lead	x			
	Zinc	x			x
B111W_VC-C	PAH		x		
	Heavy Metals		x		x
	Mercury	x			
	Lead	x			

Figure 2: Screenshot of Table B.1, Appendix M p. 132.

Instead this information is relegated to the final pages of *Appendix M*, and even here locations are provided as codes and contaminant levels as ‘high’ or ‘low’ (Figure 2). No key is provided to indicate exactly what level ‘high’ and ‘low’ is for different contaminants.

The data on the contaminants was not made available to the public during the EIS period, and was only made available after the deadline for community EIS submissions. This is plainly unfair and untransparent. The sediment of the harbour is well known to be toxic and sites associated with the WHT project are highly toxic. The shallow silt curtain proposed as a solution for containing the sediment plume will be ineffective in containing the toxic sediments due to the strong currents and boat activity of the area. Of particular concern are the chemicals currently stored in the sediments which will leach into the water column upon disturbance by construction activities. After leaching into the water these toxins will travel far and cause harm to marine life and humans consuming seafood and enjoying the harbour for years to come.

In summary, given the potential risks to human and environmental health, the fact that the project confers greater benefit to private than public traffic, and noting that the EIA written in a manner which may disempower members of the public from accessing important information, I object to Western Harbour Tunnel project.