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Tasmania

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Update on St Helens drinking water

Dear Resident,

Following on from our previous letters, we'd like to give you the latest information about the review into the safety and quality of the George River water, and cancer rates in the Break O'Day area.

George River Water Quality Panel

The chair of the Board of the Environment Protection Authority has established an independent panel of experts to investigate the science behind concerns about the quality of the untreated George River water. Its members include experts in water quality, public health, aquaculture and the chemistry of eucalypts and environmental toxicology.

The Panel will examine evidence, write a report and provide this to the Tasmanian Premier. The Panel will also publish all material submitted to the report on its website at www.georgeriverwater.org.au. This website contains a feedback page where you can register your interest online and choose to receive email updates on the progress of the Panel's work. You can contact the George River Water Quality Panel by using their online feedback form or by regular mail to:

George River Water Quality Panel
C/- PO Box 404
SANDY BAY, TASMANIA 7006

The science involved is very complex, and it may take months for the investigation to be completed. An interim report will be provided to the Tasmanian Government by 31 May 2010.

Members of the George River Water Quality Panel are:

- Graeme Batley, Chief Research Scientist, CSIRO
- Dr John McNeil, head of the Monash University School of Public Health and Preventative Medicine
- Christine Crawford, Program Leader for Natural Resource Management at the Tasmanian Aquaculture and Fisheries Institute
- Distinguished Professor Jim Reid, University of Tasmania School of Plant Science
- Professor Michael Moore, chair Water Quality Research Australia, past Director National Research Centre for Environmental Toxicology
- Dr Lois Koehnken, coordinating scientist and consultant to the panel.

Cancer rates in Break O'Day

Data from the Tasmanian Cancer Registry, managed by the Menzies Research Institute (part of the University of Tasmania) show people living in the Break O'Day area (including St Helens) do not have more cancer than people living elsewhere in Tasmania.

The concern about cancer rates was investigated when this issue was first raised in 2004. The Cancer Registry looked closely at cancers diagnosed in the area from 1998 to 2002 and found nothing unusual in either the rate or pattern of cancer types in the area.

Data from 2002 to 2006 again showed no evidence that people in the Break O'Day area have cancer at higher rates than people elsewhere in Tasmania. Overall, 194 cancer cases were seen in Break O'Day during this five year period. This was less than the 203.9 cases that were expected, based on Tasmanian trends and taking into account the local population age distribution.

Preliminary cancer data for 2007 (the latest available) again show no indication of rising cancer rates in the area. Further information will be provided when it becomes available.

It was claimed on ABC's *Australian Story* that there were only 18 cases of Waldenstrom's Anaemia (macroglobulinaemia) in Australia, with two cases in the St Helens area. However, Cancer Registry data show 45 cases have been diagnosed in Tasmania over the past 20 years, including two from Break O'Day, and the incidence rate for 2002 to 2006 is very similar to mainland Australia.

More information about cancer rates in Tasmania's local government areas is available at www.menzies.utas.edu.au/cancer_reg.html.

Water quality

The extra step recently added to the water treatment process is still in place. This is a temporary precaution that involves addition of carbon powder prior to filtration to remove any unknown harmful substances in the water not removed by the normal treatment process. The need for this will be reviewed as more information becomes available. No scientific evidence has been presented to confirm the drinking water in St Helens was unsafe for human health before this precaution was taken.

In recent weeks, the Public and Environmental Health Service has arranged tests on more water samples, as distinct from surface scum and foam. Chemical analysis for common substances from eucalyptus trees came back negative for several samples from the George River, including near the intake point and also at Crystal Creek. However, a sample from the Douglas River within a native forest showed a very small amount of a eucalyptus substance. This test was very sensitive - it can trace tiny amounts of substances (as little as 0.2 micrograms per litre).

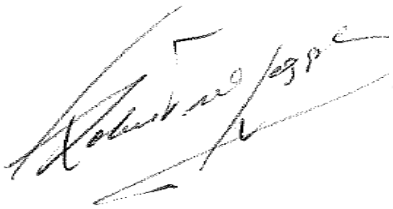
Toxicity testing using a type of water flea has shown no toxicity to the water fleas from samples of untreated George River water and water from a river within a native forest.

These test results do not prove there is or isn't a problem, but are helpful.

More information

More information is available at www.dhhs.tas.gov.au and www.georgeriverquality.org.au.

Your sincerely



Dr Roscoe Taylor
Director of Public Health

Robert Legge
Break O'Day Mayor

Barry Cash
Chief Executive, Ben Lomond Water