



Promoting Community Right to Know and Environmental Health and Justice in WA

MEDIA RELEASE

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Bellevue Toxic Site: Has Government in-action polluted the Helena River?

Sharp-eyed journalists may have spotted the Department of Environment and Conservation media release from Thursday entitled '*Clean-up moves forward at Bellevue*'. The release suggests that the clean-up of WA's most contaminated site is imminent. The reality is that eight years after Bellevue residents were showered with toxic waste following the biggest chemical fire the state has ever seen, very little has been done – certainly no clean-up. The ticking time-bomb underneath the site may have already exploded while government agencies have been asleep at the wheel. Apart from the ongoing health threat posed to residents from dust blowing off-site, the Helena River is in the direct path of the creeping contamination. This is why contaminated sites are known as slow disasters.

Government reports from 2006 showed that exceedances of safe groundwater standards for recreational swimming, aquatic ecosystems, livestock and terrestrial receptors were found on the edge of the Helena river in an area known as the damplands. In addition groundwater contamination under the fire site was also estimated in this report to reach the damplands adjacent to the Helena River by 2006. ACE believes it is highly probable that the Helena River has been contaminated by the groundwater under the fire site, in addition to the massive contamination that occurred on the night of the fire that was never adequately cleaned up, 8 years ago.

Despite requests from ACE to the Contaminated Sites Division of the DEC, no recent (before 2006) groundwater results have been provided to ACE or the affected community in Bellevue. The Bellevue Community Consultative Committee (BCCC) has not met since June 2007. The independent environmental expert assigned to the community group to assist in an equitable remediation process has not met with the group since May 2006 and has not been engaged in the latest round of decision making by the DEC. The BCCC representing the interests of the affected community, Local Government, the broader public interest and the environment, has literally been left out of the most critical aspects of the remediation process. This is not in line with the government's own community engagement principles for better governance nor the new Contaminated Sites Act and associated guidelines.

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If the Helena River has been contaminated then the fault lies squarely with the State Government and Environment Agencies who de-prioritised the clean-up of the site after Dr's Geoff Gallop and Judy Edwards retired.

Since then:

- the main driver of the clean-up , the Bellevue Community Consultative Committee has been sidelined by DEC
- the 'chemicals of concern' at the site have been reduced from a list of hundreds down to a couple of dozen by 'risk assessment' not clean-up.
- toxic gases and dust have been blowing from the site for eight years
- the Helena River is almost definitely contaminated which could have been avoided.

The 'clean-up progress' trumpeted in the media release is a *trial* of 'In situ chemical oxidation' (not an actual clean-up – just another investigation) which involves pumping oxidizing chemicals into the sub-surface contamination and hoping it destroys the waste. This trial doesn't even involve the use of oxidising chemicals because the DEC knows something it is not telling the public – there are major risks of toxic gases leaving the ground at the site and affecting residents.

Yet former Bellevue residents will still recall being told by the DEC and the Health dept, that there were no health risks from the site. Under pressure they admitted that some people might suffer minor health impacts. Later, following the ABC Four Corners exposé and a health survey conducted by ACE it was found that major health impacts had occurred and senior DEP and Health dept. chiefs were sacked. A Parliamentary Inquiry ensued that was scathing of government agencies and their handling of the fire and clean-up.

Since then we have had the toxic fiasco at Brookdale, lead waste pouring into the sea at South Beach Fremantle, multiple fires at Toxfree hazardous waste facilities, the Alcoa Wagerup pollution, the complete ecological destruction of the Cockburn sound by Kwinana Industries, noxious odours affecting residents in Leeming, and the mass poisoning of Esperance residents with lead. Trust in the DEC and Government to manage toxic materials and protect public health and the environment in WA has evaporated.

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