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Arsenic leaked into river

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THE Port of Melbourne has for four years allowed water contaminated with massive levels of cancer-causing arsenic to leach from one of its properties into the Maribyrnong River.

About 200 people a week fish within a kilometre of the arsenic poisoning at Yarraville, in Melbourne's inner west. The fishermen, mostly local Vietnamese, often eat their catch.

Despite a series of contamination tests, neither the port nor the Environment Protection Authority — which knew for 10 years about the extremely high arsenic levels — warned the fishermen. The EPA did not test the fish. The last time it tested the river water for arsenic was in the 1970s, an *Age* investigation has found.

The state's environmental watchdog managed to extract a clean-up plan from the port authority only this month.

The port discovered the arsenic problem before its 2001 purchase of the Whitehall Street, Yarraville, property, one of the most contaminated pieces of real estate in Victoria. But under the contract of sale, the port authority "forever released" the former owner, fertiliser company Pivot, from any legal or financial liability to clean up the site.

Taxpayers will now foot the bill for decontaminating the land, which had housed a chemical, fertiliser and acid plant since the 1840s. *The Age* believes the port has put aside more than \$4.5 million, but the final cost could be more than \$10 million.

The pollution — a toxic mix of heavy metals and other noxious substances — is in shallow groundwater in direct contact with the Maribyrnong River.

Tests over 10 years have shown the groundwater has up to 20,000 times the arsenic level regarded as environmentally safe and 81 times the criteria for

human contact. The tests measure pollution flowing to the river, not levels in the river itself.

The latest report, commissioned by the port, was conducted by independent auditor Roger Parker. It found the groundwater is leaking copper into the Maribyrnong at 154,000 times the EPA limit for the environment. Zinc is leaching at up to 5000 times the limit and lead up to 250 times. The levels of ammonia are 33,500 times the standard set as healthy for human contact.

"Most of the fishermen here eat everything they catch," says western suburbs fisherman Colin Wilkinson, who has fished in the area for 50 years. "No one has ever warned us about eating the fish. They should have done tests. The EPA have a lot of questions to answer."

The arsenic is leaching from iron oxide used for decades to fill the banks of the lower Maribyrnong and probably the Yarra. One consultant estimated there were 70,000 cubic metres of the spent iron oxide and contaminated fill — six metres deep in some places and covering half the property — at the former Pivot site alone.

An *Age* investigation has found:

- According to a 2001 report by consultant Peter Ramsay — for Pivot — the EPA has been concerned about arsenic levels in the Maribyrnong since the 1990s. In 1995 it received a report showing arsenic leaching at about 3000 times the standard. For five years it did nothing about the arsenic.
- The port paid a laboratory to continue testing the groundwater during 2003, but no one was interpreting the results, which included the highest levels of arsenic in eight years of testing.
- The port authority's executive in charge of overseeing the site's environmental problems, Nick Easy, has recently been made the head of the channel-deepening project.
- The Department of Human Services is conducting research into fishing in the lower Maribyrnong and Yarra rivers — who is eating the fish and how often. A department spokesman said more information was needed about any possible health effects of eating fish from these areas.

Mr Parker's report found the contaminated groundwater had an unacceptable and significant impact on the Maribyrnong River and there was potential for the polluted water to affect aquatic life.

The ground water is also leaching cobalt, iron, manganese, mercury, molybdenum, nickel, selenium and cadmium into the Maribyrnong.

The port denied that it was slow to act on the site. It said the first formal EPA clean-up notice was received in November 2003. Port spokesman Peter Harry said the authority commissioned more sampling than required and was determined to see the site fixed. "The Port of Melbourne is the state's best hope of having this site cleaned up in a responsible manner," he said.

The EPA should have tested the river and fish downstream, said Andrea Hinwood, an environmental scientist and arsenic expert at Edith Cowan University. "If those levels are going into the river, as a precautionary approach they should do the testing and provide people with some certainty that it's OK. Those are very high levels."

Long-term exposure to arsenic can cause cancers and organ and skin damage.

Without tests, it is unclear how much the Maribyrnong can dilute the arsenic. "The fish are likely to pick up some contamination from that environment, but it depends on how the arsenic disperses in the river," Dr Hinwood said.

Environment Victoria's healthy rivers campaigner Paul Sinclair said the EPA should have the courage to prosecute those who put these poisons into the city's rivers. "If the EPA has turned a blind eye to this poisoning for 10 years, it's shameful. If they've been willing to put the public's health on the line to cover for industry then the people of Victoria have been betrayed," he said.

The EPA said it "expected" any impacts on the Maribyrnong of the groundwater arsenic to be localised.

River flow and tides were expected to dilute the arsenic to safe levels.

But the EPA admitted it had not conducted tests on the river since the 1970s — when it had low arsenic levels — and had relied on a report from a private consultant (Ramsay), who took three samples in 2001 to feel assured that levels of arsenic in the river were safe.

"(The arsenic) still shouldn't be there, that's the bottom line," said Stuart McConnell, the EPA's senior manager in charge of urban services.

"We are aware that the work towards a clean-up of the (site) has taken some time, but EPA remains focused on a long-term outcome for this area."

The port bought the land for just over \$13 million.

The site has remained vacant since Pivot moved out in late 2003.

The contamination — arsenic, copper, lead, zinc, aldrin, dieldrin and cyanide — has made it unsafe for workers.

The site's clean-up, due to be completed in 2007, is likely to involve an expensive barrier, such as a wall, between the site and the river, according to consultants' reports.