

over ongoing contamination concerns

three times.

In conjunction with the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority he is now busy planting 6500 trees on seven hectares of his land, including a lagoon, to help restore ecology.

"The goal is to create more space for habitat to control things in the environment," Mr Ryan said.

EPA AUDIT

In 2003, the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) was commissioned by the Gippsland Lakes Taskforce to conduct an audit of dairy farms in the Macalister Irrigation District (MID) that had access to Central Gippsland Drain No. 2.

Southern Rural Water had become aware of "an upwards trend of nutrients leaving some catchments within the MID".

The idea of the audit was to protect the Gippsland Lakes from animal wastes discharged to water and improve water quality, including the reduction of pathogens within the tributaries of the Lakes.

Its other purpose was to "improve dairy effluent management practices within the Gippsland Lakes".

A staggering 71 per cent of those audited had "unacceptable effluent management systems".

The report found "it was evident from those farms audited, that there was a general lack of awareness by the majority of farmers of the importance of good waste management practices".

"The low level of awareness and high level of poor environmental management in this catchment would suggest that EPA and DPI (Department of Primary Industries) extension services need to be upgraded to raise the level of performance of dairy farms across the region," the report said.

Just 16 farms (29 per cent) "were found to be operating satisfactorily at the time of inspection".

EPA found that where farmers had installed effluent systems "a significant percentage are

failing due to poor management practices and a lack of ongoing maintenance".

Blue-green algal blooms were identified as one of the main hazards in the Lakes system from irrigation run-off, fertiliser run-off and dairy effluent discharges.

The EPA report made 26 recommendations, of which the first two would be considered the most critical in ensuring the Lakes system was afforded ongoing protection.

They were that:

1) EPA continue to audit/inspect all dairy farms within the Macalister Irrigation District and

2) EPA continue to carry out audits/inspections of all dairy farms within the Gippsland Lakes catchment.

Despite those findings, the regional manager for EPA Gippsland, Zac Dornom, said last week that "blue-green algae occurs naturally and is common in the Gippsland Lakes".

Mr Dornom did, however, say "should any member of the public have evidence of an agricultural or industrial spill that might be aggravating an algal bloom" to report the location and provide relevant details to the EPA's 24-hour pollution hotline.

He said EPA responds to reports by "investigating and where there is actual evidence of an industrial or agricultural cause, can provide the duty holder with compliance advice, or make use of a legally enforceable remedial notice, fine or prosecution, where necessary".

As to further audits of dairy farms as recommended by its own 2003 report into the issue of nutrients entering the Gippsland Lakes, the EPA is yet to comment.

RAMSAR OBLIGATIONS

The president of the Gippsland Environment Group, Mary Connor, says "there's a history of a lack of monitoring within the Gippsland Lakes system".

"What they don't measure, they don't know," she said.

"They don't want to be seen to be in

contravention of the Ramsar obligations," Ms Connor said of government bodies charged with responsibility of Gippsland's waterways.

The Gippsland Lakes, which covers an area of more than 60,000 hectares, is a Ramsar listed site, designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

The Convention is an intergovernmental environmental treaty established in 1971 by UNESCO and provides for national action and international cooperation regarding the conservation of wetlands.

Ms Connor says East Gippsland Water's recent discharges into the Forge Creek from its Paynesville sewerage treatment plant, which ultimately entered the Lakes system by the Newlands Arm backwater, would have "a direct influence on the Lakes with a massive amount of nutrients entering the waterways".

"Overall, there was a lack of monitoring when that sewage was let go when there should have been massive amounts of monitoring," she said.

EPA has formally warned East Gippsland Water (EGW) about the environmental breaches and directed it to make necessary modifications to its wastewater management system by April 28 (2022).

Newlands Arm residents, Judy Leadoux and John Kramme, are especially concerned about the treated effluent being discharged into Forge Creek.

"East Gippsland Water should never have been allowed to do it," Ms Leadoux told the *Advertiser*.

She says Newlands Arm and Duck Arm are both backwaters and don't have any freshwater flowing through so the blue-green algal bloom, combined with EGW dumps of treated effluent from its Paynesville facility, essentially has nowhere to go.

Ms Leadoux also remains critical of EGW "putting treated effluent onto land around Forge Creek that they own and lease".

"When we have a rain event that treated effluent finds its way into the Lakes," she said.

BLACK GLUE

Mr Kramme is a keen fisherman who regularly fishes Newlands Arm but is numb with shock at what he is witnessing.

"I have been at the top of Newlands Arm where it's like a black glue," he said.

"It's just a putrid mess."

Mr Kramme says the waterway where Forge Creek enters the Lakes system is thick with sludge.

"To put treated effluent into Newlands Arm is the same as putting it into Duck Arm," he says.

"There's nowhere for it to escape.

"They don't want to test it because what they'll find up there is a terrible mess," Mr Kramme said.

He said irrigating the effluent onto land was a nonsense "because the run-off from the land is going into the creek".

East Gippsland Shire councillor, Jane Greacan, lives on the Banksia Peninsula.

She says the algal bloom "is the worst I have ever seen".

"At the end of Duck Arm it doesn't wash out so it's just going to stew," Cr Greacan said.

"We really need to undertake a full review of the Lakes, what is going into them, run-off from land, including farms, industry etc.

Cr Greacan said the impact on the Lakes becoming a marine environment also needed to be examined.

"It's a complex ecosystem and we need to manage it a lot better.

"Is the clear felling of the forests also impacting?"

Cr Greacan said with "so many factors potentially impacting, we need a good, independent scientific evaluation".

The *Advertiser* contacted the Victorian Farmers Federation who declined to comment.

Southern Rural Water and DELWP have also been approached for comment.

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