

# Esperance parliamentary inquiry follow-up factsheet: Where to from Here??

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[LID 9558]*

Following the reported deaths of hundreds of native birds within the coastal tourist town of Esperance in Western Australian between December 2006 and March 2007, it was discovered that lead being transported through the town's port had caused their deaths. A Parliamentary Inquiry into the event was instigated, and their report was presented in September 2007. For those who haven't the time or inclination to read the Parliamentary Inquiry Report, here is a brief summary with some of my thoughts.

The Report concluded that the deaths of the 9500 native birds in December 2006 and March 2007 resulted from lead poisoning from Magellan Metals lead carbonate concentrate which had been handled by the Esperance Port Authority from April 2005 until March 2007. A quarter of the children under 5 years of age that were tested showed a blood lead level over 5ug/dL. Whilst this is not as high as other communities affected by lead pollution, it certainly shows an impact from lead contamination.

“The Committee believes that the exposure of Esperance community members to Magellan lead was a result of:

- the ongoing transport to, and inloading practices at, the Esperance Port which occurred almost every second day over some 23 months;
- the escape of lead dust during the usual outloading practices at the Esperance Port, which occurred on 22 occasions; and
- a number of key dust incidents occurring during ship-loading of the Magellan lead concentrate at the Esperance Port, which released significant lead pollution into the environment, and in the absence of any containment or clean up, caused on-going exposures to lead.”

The Report found that the Esperance community had been let down by the actions of the Esperance Port Authority (including the Port Authority Board), Magellan Metals and the WA Department of Environment (DEC). The DEC has instigated legal action against the Esperance Port Authority on various matters relating to polluting the Esperance town site.

The inquiry have recommended extra resources be provided to the DEC so that they can more adequately fulfill their role, and that the management, infrastructure and monitoring at the Esperance Port be upgraded. They also have recommended that legislation be put in place that “a port authority be required to ensure that public health is not adversely impacted by its conduct.”

Department of Health involvement in the approvals processes as mandatory is warmly received. If the recommendations of the WA Department of Health from September 2005 had been implemented, the Esperance community may have been spared a lot of heartache.

One of the findings stated “Factors such as family circumstance and educational opportunities are potentially far more important to a child’s cognitive ability than exposure to lead.” Hopefully rather than taking a ‘wait and see’ approach towards children’s development, the government will provide extra resources to the local schools for smaller class sizes in the early primary years, or extra teachers’ aides in the classes.

It is pleasing to note that a lot of the recommendations will have implications, not only for Esperance, but also for other port communities in Western Australia. In November 2007, Bunbury was the fourth Western Australian port (apart from Esperance) to undergo an assessment by the DEC with a particular focus on off-site emissions and the ports’ capability to handle and store products.

Whilst not within the terms of reference, the extent of nickel pollution within the Esperance town site was highlighted in the report. Through the extensive testing done within the township for lead, nickel has also been identified as a pollutant. Rainwater tanks, dust swab results and ceiling space dust have all shown elevated levels of nickel- a fact that wouldn’t surprise a lot of locals who have had issues with the smell of xanthates from the nickel for years.

Locals for Esperance Development (LED) are pushing for a guarantee of zero nickel dust emissions in the town site. Unfortunately once the product is being handled, the processes to enable change move very slowly. It is vitally important with new commodities to be handled by the Port, that effective handling process and safeguards for the community are implemented BEFORE any product is handled.

Lead and nickel dust in the Esperance community will persist for a while yet, and residents will have to remain vigilant in their efforts to clean their houses. Until we have definitive data to show that there are no longer elevated levels of heavy metals within our community, we will not be able to have our clean town back.

Thank goodness for the poor birds that died in Dec 2006 and March 2007. If they had not died, I dread to imagine the situation we would be in now. Hopefully, lessons will be learned from this incident, and Esperance will be a better place to live because of it.

Thanks to Dr Nic Dunlop from the Conservation Council of WA, the long term effects of heavy metal exposure on the native birds in Esperance are being researched. Dr Dunlop is expected to release his first round of results this week (28<sup>th</sup> June 2008).

In June 2008, 9 000 tonne of Magellan Metals’ lead carbonate remains within a shed at the Esperance Port Authority and Magellan Metals still have not resumed exporting their product from the mine. The remaining lead in Esperance is proposed to be put in bulka bags and loaded into a ship, the entire process being monitored 24/7 by independent auditors to ensure no further contamination of the township.

Magellan Metals have applied to export their product from the Wiluna mine through the Port of Fremantle in bulka bags within double sealed containers. The Fremantle City Council is opposed to the transport of lead carbonate in this way through residential areas and is asking that it be transported in an ingot form. Magellan Metals gave assurances to the Esperance community as early as 2004 that they would build a smelter in Wiluna and export most of their product as an ingot. This promise was never fulfilled.