

MINING, TAILINGS FACILITIES, WATER QUALITY PROTECTION GUIDELINES

2565. Hon Nigel Hallett to the Minister for Education and Training representing the Minister for the Environment

I refer to a document which I understand is titled 'Water Quality Protection Guidelines No. 2, Mining and Mineral Processing, Tailings Facilities 2000' which were endorsed/signed and agreed upon by the Waters and Rivers Commission, Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Minerals and Energy -

- (1) Can the Minister explain how the Department of Environment justifies making proponents spend large amounts of money on seepage recovery bores, seepage perimeter drains that feed containment dams, seepage monitoring and sampling programs on the basis of supposedly minimising adverse environmental impacts given that the Department clearly acknowledges that seepage through the floor of the tailings dams is inevitable which obviously causes the water table to rise, causing salinisation of the soils, potential impacts on the vegetation, adverse impacts on neighbouring tenements, or any land tenure and infrastructure as a result of the unnatural elevated water levels?
- (2) If no to (1), why not?
- (3) Can the Minister state in what year did the Department of Environment discover and work out that seepage through the floor from any tailings dam is inevitable?
- (4) If no to (3), why not?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH replied:

The Minister for the Environment; Science has provided the following response:

- (1) Yes. The guidelines were developed in consultation between the Water and Rivers Commission, Department of Environmental Protection and Department of Minerals and Energy. These guidelines were developed to establish actions required by operators to meet their obligations under all of the Acts administered by those Departments and to also guide operators into areas of best practice that may be over and above legislative requirements.

In the Goldfields area, there are various measures to minimise seepage from tailings dams. These measures are employed to greater or lesser degrees by the Department of Environment depending on the risk that seepage poses on the environmental values of the area. This is a judgement against local conditions and the relevant environmental values for the area.

Appeal provisions in the environmental protection statutes are available to allow proponents to challenge any regulatory aspects that they may consider to be unreasonable.

- (2) Not applicable.
- (3) The then Department of Environmental Protection was aware since the 1980s that any structure containing water with an engineered soil lining will allow some seepage based on fundamental hydrogeological principles. The guidance statements used since that time have been based on limiting seepage to a rate that does not pose a significant risk to surrounding environmental values. This intent has been backed up by regulatory measures designed to intercept seepage and further limit any downstream effects, and to operate a monitoring system that allows the risks from seepage to be assessed, and when necessary strengthen environmental protective measures to meet local conditions.
- (4) Not applicable.