

OMEX SITE, AIR MONITORING

750. Dr EDWARDS to the Minister for the Environment:

- (1) Is the minister aware of a meeting held on 11 May 2000 between the Executive Director of Public Health, the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Bellevue residents and representatives of the Bellevue Action Group at the Omex site remediation?
- (2) If so, is the minister aware of the discussions held on that day regarding complaints by residents living close to the site that the fumes from the excavations were affecting their health?
- (3) Did the minister request or receive any advice from the contractors regarding air monitoring results from the Omex remediation -
 - (a) prior to the meeting; and/or
 - (b) on the day of the meeting?
- (4) If not, why not?
- (5) If yes, what was that advice?
- (6) Did the Chief Executive Officer of the DEP advise *The West Australian* newspaper on or about 12 May 2000 that scientific air monitoring around the site has not detected any emissions likely to have health effects?
- (7) Is the minister aware that on 6 May 2000 at 8.20 am an exceedance of Volatile Organic Compounds was registered at 12.8 ppm, some 8 times higher than the action level set by the Health Department of Western Australia to protect public health during the remediation?
- (8) Is the minister aware that 183 exceedances of Volatile Organic Compounds, 84 exceedances of sulphur dioxide and 29 complaints from the community were reported prior to 12 May 2000?
- (9) Will the minister explain why the DEP advised *The West Australian* newspaper that scientific air monitoring around the site had (sic) not detected any emissions likely to have health effects?
- (10) Has the DEP misled the public?
- (11) If not, why not?

Mrs EDWARDES replied:

- (1) I have been advised that a joint meeting between officers of the Health Department of Western Australia (HDWA) and the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) with representatives of the Bellevue Action Group (BAG) was held at the Omex site at approximately 5.50 pm on 11 May 2000.
- (2) No. At the time I was not advised of the discussions held at the meeting. However, I have since been advised that representatives of BAG informed the meeting that some residents were concerned about the health impact of the emissions from the site.
- (3) No.
- (4) The DEP has responsibility for advising the community on air monitoring aspects of the remediation.
- (5) Not applicable.
- (6) No.
- (7) A report by Thiess Environmental Services (Thiess) dated 20 June 2000 describes exceedances for air monitoring parameters at the Omex site and the Bellevue Primary School for the period 17 April to 7 May 2000. This report refers to a Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) level of 12.8 ppm being recorded over a one minute period at the northern boundary of the Omex site at 8.20 am on 6 May 2000. With respect to the magnitude of the VOC exceedance to which the member refers, I assume that the value of eight times the action level is based on the action level for benzene of 1.4 ppm. I wish to point out that benzene is only one of the components of total VOCs and it was not detected in any of the benzene-specific tests undertaken on 6 May 2000. It is inappropriate, however, to suggest that the action level for benzene was exceeded if the VOC levels were higher than 1.4 ppm and imply that the health of the community was jeopardised.
- (8) Some clarification is necessary at this time on the assumptions and implications inherent in the data used for the questions asked. The member is referring to an early period in the remediation of the Omex site when detailed reporting of exceedances by the contractor to the DEP was not required. In

June 2000, in response to concerns raised at the Community Intermediary Committee (principally by BAG), reports were sought from Thiess for air monitoring exceedances during the earlier period. Preliminary reports on VOC and sulphur dioxide exceedances for the periods 9 to 16 May and 17 April to 8 May were made available to the committee on 13 June and 22 June respectively.

The DEP advises me that the number of exceedances referred to by the member do not correlate with the information in the reports released by Thiess in June. These reports show that for the period prior to 12 May, there were 131 instances of exceedances of VOC (not 183) and 38 instances of exceedances of sulphur dioxide (not 84). Furthermore, should the member care to review this data more closely, she will find that 26 of the 38 instances of exceedances of sulphur dioxide (68 per cent) were explained by Thiess at the time as being due to factors other than air emissions, such as instrument calibration and drift.

As pointed out in my answer to the previous question, it is inappropriate to compare VOC levels, of which benzene is only one component, with the action level for benzene itself when assessing the likely risks to health.

Information available to the DEP indicates that, during the entire period of the Omex clean-up, benzene was detected by the gas chromatograph unit on two occasions only, at 10.53 and 11.08 am on 26 April 2000, at which time levels of 0.0034 and 0.008 ppm, respectively, were reported. These values are at least 175 times less than the action level of 1.4 ppm.

I understand that BAG has, on a number of occasions, claimed to have a record of many people whose health was affected by the remediation work at Omex. Repeated requests by HDWA, both directly and at the Omex Community Intermediary Committee meetings, for BAG to provide the list so that HDWA could investigate the complaints were not responded to.

- (9) Based on all the air monitoring information available at the time, the collective professional judgment of officers of the DEP and the HDWA was that the community was not at risk. Furthermore, I have yet to receive any medical advice from Health Department WA that emissions from the Omex site during the remediation adversely affected the health of nearby residents.
- (10) Not to my knowledge.
- (11) See answer to question 9.