

ESPERANCE LEAD POLLUTION

144. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure:

I refer to the Esperance lead scandal and the minister's flying visit to the town yesterday.

- (1) Has the minister established why there are extremely high lead levels on the sea floor in the harbour?
- (2) How is it that Magellan Metals Pty Ltd was allowed to transport and export lead out of Esperance port as a powder rather than as pellets?
- (3) Has the minister established why the Esperance Port Authority did not respond to its own high dust monitoring results in February and March 2006?
- (4) What assistance is the government going to give to the family with the baby with dangerous lead levels who have been advised to move house?

Ms A.J.G. MacTIERNAN replied:

I thank the member for some notice of this question.

- (1)-(4) As the member has stated, there are very serious issues here. I will be perfectly candid: I think there has been a failing on the part of the port authority in the handling of lead. The initial arrangement was that moisture would be added to the lead and the lead would be conglomerated into small moist balls and transported in that way. The logic was that that would reduce the level of dust and the possibility of contamination. When, as a practical matter, that process was put in place, the material was taken by truck and transferred to a rail head. There was then a 600 or so kilometre rail journey south to the Esperance port. What effectively happened is that the conglomerates deconglomerated. It appears that there was no formal action taken by the port to get this dealt with, to advise the community of this, or in any formal sense to advise the Department of Environment and Conservation. However, there appears to have been informal arrangements. Quite frankly, in relation to lead, the potential capacity of the product to be harmful requires that this be dealt with in a far more serious manner.

In relation to the tests in February 2006, there was an unfortunate experience. The test results went to a particular company that then subcontracted the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation to analyse the dust. Every quarter or so the dust is monitored. I am advised that the results of the test did not come back until some eight or nine months later. The port advises me that it took a series of actions, and that it can demonstrate this through a chain of emails, to try to follow this up and to get the CSIRO to produce the report earlier. All these matters will be dealt with. All of the matters about how we have come to be in this situation are matters that we anticipate will be analysed by the parliamentary committee.

Mr P.D. Omodei: What about the family with the baby?

Ms A.J.G. MacTIERNAN: I am not aware that the family with a baby have been advised to move house. Certainly, we are very concerned to make sure that there is absolutely the best medical advice available to all people who have elevated lead blood levels. We had Dr Andy Robinson from the Department of Health - who is a pre-eminent specialist - come down with us. There is a clear commitment from the Department of Health that all persons who have an elevated lead blood level will have access to the state's leading specialists on the matter of lead contamination and how best to deal with it.