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Water quality testing shows little change in Gladstone Harbour

The State Government has today released a report relating to water quality for Port Curtis over the past year which shows there has been little change in test results - including since dredging projects began.

Environment Minister Vicky Darling said it was important the information released today was put into the public arena.

“There has been a lot of speculation in the community and it’s very important that we can openly and transparently show the community that water quality testing is on-going – and has been for some time,” Ms Darling said.

“It’s equally important that the results of that testing show there has been little change in Gladstone Harbour over the past year, other than immediately following heavy rainfall in January when changes in water quality were consistent with flood waters extending into the area.”

The water quality testing and review carried out by the Department of Environment and Resource Management will provide input to the further investigation by an independent scientific panel looking into fish disease in the area

DERM’s Director of Water Quality and Aquatic Ecosystem Health Dr Julia Playford said DERM’s water quality review analysed data from three sources:

- The Boyne and Calliope estuaries, collected by DERM since 1994
- The Port Curtis Integrated Monitoring Program, from July 2008 to July 2011 and
- Gladstone Harbour, provided by the Gladstone Ports Corporation, covering the period from October 2010 to August 2011.

Dr Playford said the results showed there had been little change between October last year and August this year, a time when there was a significant increase in dredging activity.

She said the analysis for the estuaries and the harbour showed natural variation in water quality due to seasons, flooding rains and drought.

“That means there had not been any significant changes in water quality in the area before and after the diseased fish appeared, except for those explained by this year’s heavy rainfall,” Dr Playford said.

“The assessment shows that pH in Port Curtis has not fallen below 7.1, therefore the waters of the harbour are not acidic. Dissolved oxygen levels are not unexpectedly low. Metals’ results are similar to historical records showing spikes after periods of high rainfall.

“However, information assessed for the Boyne estuary shows that the levels of salinity have been the lowest that have ever been recorded - with DERM’s data going back to 1994.

“This is consistent with flood waters extending the freshwater into areas that would previously have been salty.

“In recent weeks, turbidity temporarily increased, resulting in the temporary close of dredging over the last weekend.”

Dr Playford said that the pH levels recorded did not indicate that the acidity of the water was at a level that would impact on fish health in the harbour or at any of the specific monitoring sites.

“A review of monitoring data has found no evidence to suggest the presence of acidic (low pH) water from acid sulphate soils disturbed by dredging.

“What we know from that long term data under multiple testing regimes is that there has been not been any obvious or unusual deterioration in water quality outside of historical fluctuations.

“The Department of Environment and Resource Management has been undertaking monthly monitoring of the Calliope and Boyne River estuaries for water quality parameters since 1994.”

The Gladstone Ports Corporation commissions continuous water quality monitoring at a number of locations in Port Curtis, a control site in Rodd’s Bay, and four offshore sites which are dredge spoil grounds.

The Corporation also undertakes weekly water sampling and analysis at a further 26 locations around Port Curtis.

Initial inquiries – which will form part of the scientific panel’s investigation – indicate red-spot disease and a parasite are potentially responsible for a spate of recent fish deaths.

Fisheries Queensland General Manager of Habitat and Assessment Dr John Robertson said red-spot disease was found in waters in Queensland, New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Victoria and Western Australia and is caused by a fungus.

“It typically occurs in fish when they are under stress,” Dr Robertson said.

“The disease usually occurs either during winter months when the immunity of the fish is lower, or following the first heavy rainfall of the wet season.

“The parasite is also endemic and is reported occasionally in Queensland in saltwater, with symptoms including cloudy eyes.”

He said fish caught showing any signs of illness should be disposed of on land, not returned to the water or consumed.

“Testing on samples including prawns, crabs and other fish species are continuing to identify the disease,” Dr Robertson said.

Commercial fishers who would like to be involved in further fish sampling for testing are asked to contact Fisheries Queensland on 13 25 23.