

**Question on Notice
No. 646
Asked on 9 May 2006**

QUESTION:

MR MESSENGER asked the Minister for Environment, Local Government, Planning and Women (Ms Boyle)—

With reference to her media release dated 20 April 2006 where she announced that her department had finally taken action to stop the dumping of sewage into an open sludge pit at Agnes Waters by the Miriam Vale Shire Council—

- (1) How many other sewage sludge pits has her department allowed to operate and will a statewide audit be undertaken to determine the extent of this environment problem?
- (2) What records does her department keep on this type of activity by councils?

ANSWER:

- (1) The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) preferred position for the disposal of septic tank waste is through a municipal sewerage system. Through the sewerage system, waste is further treated and stabilised and there is potential for the treated liquid phase to be recycled by irrigation, for example, and the stabilised sludges, called biosolids, to be used as soil fertilisers. The most recent recycling figures for Queensland show that nearly 300,000 tonnes of biosolids are recycled annually.

Unfortunately access to sewerage systems is not available in some rural and remote areas of Queensland and it is necessary to dispose of the septic tank waste to landfill. Under these circumstances the waste is disposed under set conditions to manage potential environmental impacts, such as run-off and impacts upon watercourses. As these landfills service small populations, the volume of septic tank waste is small.

The EPA records show that 34 Queensland landfills currently accept septic tank waste. The EPA is working together with local government on a number of options that aim to reduce the disposal of septic tank waste at landfills. Some examples of recent action include:

- Miriam Vale Shire Council – Agnes Water Landfill: The EPA has negotiated with Council to close down the sludge pit. The waste from this pit will be fed to the Agnes Water sewage treatment plant (STP) for treatment.
- Calliope Shire Council – Bororen Landfill: The EPA is negotiating with Council to close down the sludge pit.

- Cairns City Council – Portsmith: This pit is now only used in emergencies.
- All 14 of the Island and Aboriginal Councils currently operating sludge pits are progressively being sewered. As these areas become sewered the only material disposed of at landfills is sludge from the STPs.

Septic tank waste from domestic sources is not classed as regulated waste and can be lawfully disposed of at landfill. For other types of sewage waste, disposal at landfill requires an approval. Local governments with approval to operate sewage sludge pits at landfills prior to the commencement of the *Environmental Protection Act 1994* were given approvals under the new legislation. Sewage sludge pits on landfill sites can continue to lawfully operate under provisions in the Act that allow them to receive a limited amount of regulated waste.

The EPA conducts audits of landfills throughout Queensland on a risk basis. As part of these audits, inspections are made of waste disposal areas, including any permitted septic tank waste disposal areas, to determine compliance with the required environmental controls.

In addition, the EPA works with local government to improve the management of septic tank waste. Agnes Water has experienced rapid population growth and the local government has upgraded its sewage management systems accordingly. The Agency has worked with the Miriam Vale Shire Council to improve septic tank waste management as part of this upgrade.

I do not consider it necessary to conduct a statewide audit on this issue at this time.

- (2) Landfills are required to operate under a development approval, with conditions set by the EPA for the protection of the environment. Under circumstances where the disposal of septic tank waste is permitted, the approval includes conditions that set out the requirements for the disposal of the septic tank waste. Each licensed activity has a file on which all dealings, including audit inspections, are recorded.