

**Question on Notice
No. 564
Asked on 17 April 2007**

QUESTION:

MRS MENKENS asked the Minister for Environment and Multiculturalism (Ms Nelson-Carr)—

With reference to the concerns about dangerously high lead levels recorded in Mt Isa—

- (1) What is her response and her department's response?
- (2) What investigations are taking place to identify the source?
- (3) What further monitoring is taking place?

ANSWER:

Mount Isa is located in a mineral rich area and has high natural occurrences of lead at the surface. Xstrata operates one of the world's largest lead mining and smelting operations.

The Government has comprehensive controls to manage and minimise potential impacts on the community. These controls have improved the management of lead in Mount Isa, with blood lead levels in children substantially falling since the early 1990s.

As part of the controls on the smelter operations, the Government requires Xstrata to operate an extensive air monitoring system in Mount Isa. The monitoring data shows that Xstrata currently meets its statutory emission requirements under the *Mount Isa Mines Limited Agreement Act 1985*.

Xstrata uses the monitoring data along with a sophisticated weather forecasting system to control its daily operations, reducing smelter operations to minimise emissions reaching the city of Mount Isa. Xstrata has also implemented pollution reduction programs to reduce its emissions and to progressively reduce any impacts on the environment.

Recent media articles have greatly overstated the extent of lead contamination within the residential areas of Mount Isa. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the information and found that the majority of the residential areas tested had soil lead levels within national guidelines. High levels of lead in soil are very restricted in area and generally occur in close proximity to the mine. The predominately heavy industry land use in this area minimises the potential exposure of people to any area with elevated lead levels.

Procedures that the Government has put in place in order to manage potentially elevated lead soil levels include land use planning controls for the

management of lead contaminated soil. These controls require the inspection of properties that are to be used for residential or child care purposes and the removal of any identified contaminated soil for safe disposal.

The effectiveness of current management procedures is being monitored through a Queensland Health blood sampling program for young children in Mount Isa. Over 250 children have been tested with approximately 10% of the children above the target set by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

Queensland Health takes immediate remedial actions with any children having blood lead above the NHMRC target to reduce the levels and to identify potential sources of exposure to lead.

I am encouraging Mount Isa residents to participate in the Queensland Health program. The results of the program are critical for identifying issues and making improvements to lead management in Mount Isa.

The EPA is reviewing air monitoring data for Mount Isa and contaminated land management practices. It is also reviewing dust and soil data provided by Queensland Health as part of its sampling program.

Xstrata has engaged an independent expert in metal contamination to assess lead impacts. The EPA and Queensland Health have agreed to collaborate with the expert in order to achieve improved lead management.

Queensland Health, in consultation with the EPA, is preparing an information sheet for the Mount Isa community that will help with lead management. The information includes simple procedures that the community can follow to also limit exposure to lead, such as maintaining a good grass cover in backyard play areas for young children, washing hands regularly, particularly before eating, and regularly cleaning up household dust.

The Government recognises the importance of continuing to improve lead management and is currently reviewing the controls to identify improvement opportunities. The EPA and Queensland Health are working closely together on this review.