

Question on Notice

No. 149

Asked on Tuesday, 5 March 2024

MR S O'CONNOR ASKED THE MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE GREAT BARRIER REEF AND MINISTER FOR SCIENCE AND INNOVATION (HON L LINARD)—

QUESTION:

With reference to the recent asbestos detections in compost stockpiles at Ipswich business NuGrow and the targeted inspections conducted by the Department of Environment, Science and Innovation and the Asbestos Safety Unit of Workplace Health and Safety Queensland—

Will the Minister advise (a) what date the inspections began, (b) how long the sites in question will be monitored for, (c) how the sites were selected and (d) how many more sites are planned to be inspected?

ANSWER:

- (a) The Department of Environment, Science and Innovation coordinated a joint proactive inspection program with the Asbestos Safety Unit of Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ), following recent reports of asbestos in mulch in New South Wales.

Proactive inspections and sampling at landfill operations, transfer stations, landscape suppliers, composters and mulch suppliers in south east Queensland began on 20 February 2024.

- (b) A small amount of asbestos was detected in one stockpile of a final soil blend product at a composting facility in Swanbank, Ipswich, operated by NuGrow Ipswich Pty Ltd. Three other samples were taken at that time and returned negative results. A further 17 samples were subsequently taken from the site and all have returned negative results.

The department, and WHSQ, took immediate action to impose requirements on NuGrow to protect community health, safety, and the environment. This included requiring information about where the contaminated material may have been distributed and prohibiting the movement of potentially contaminated material from the site unless specific conditions could be met.

The department will closely monitor the NuGrow site to ensure compliance with the requirements of the emergency direction. The department will also continue its investigation into the potential source of the initial detection at the Swanbank site and take action as required to ensure appropriate controls are in place at that site to prevent any future asbestos contamination.

Recent testing also detected asbestos in a mulch stockpile at Livingstone Shire Council's Emu Park transfer station. The department took swift action to impose requirements on the Council for the management of the site and is working with Queensland Health and the Council to ensure that any risk to the community is minimised.

The department will continue to monitor the NuGrow and Emu Park sites until the contaminated material has been cleared or disposed of and all requirements of the emergency directions have been met.

The department also identified asbestos at four other sites, but not in products leaving the site. The department and WHSQ have engaged with the operators of these sites to encourage, and in some case require, improvements in the identification, management and disposal of asbestos.

The department is taking the opportunity following the proactive inspection program to further educate waste operators of their responsibilities and obligations under legislation regarding appropriate management and disposal of asbestos. This will include industry facing guidance material and further engagement with industry associations to identify and address risk areas and share information to improve environmental performance across the sector.

The department conducts routine risk-based monitoring of the sites under its regulation. Management practices around identification, segregation and disposal of asbestos will be a key focus area for future inspections at waste facilities.

- (c) The proactive asbestos inspection and sampling program was aimed at assessing a variety of sites including landfill operations, transfer stations, local government green waste receival facilities, private green waste receival facilities, composters and landscape suppliers. These facilities were identified as highest priority for inspections due to their role in the product supply chain for mulch and similar garden products.
- (d) A further 13 sites have been inspected across Queensland, in addition to the 23 facilities originally targeted in February 2024, bringing a total of 36 sites inspected through the proactive program. The proactive asbestos inspection and sampling program is now complete.