

Damning documents in Sydney water contamination scandal

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The state Labor government in New South Wales is continuing to withhold documents on the contamination of Sydney's water supply, defying threats of parliamentary censure. Michael Egan, the Treasurer in Premier Bob Carr's government, will go before the state Supreme Court on October 27 to argue that state parliament's upper house, the Legislative Council, has 'no power' to order him to table further documents.

Last week a threat of suspension from parliament prompted Egan to table 20,000 pages of documents relating to the infestation of the water supply by the potentially fatal micro-organisms, giardia and cryptosporidium. This was still only 80 percent of the papers demanded by the upper house MPs, who voted last week for the release of all material relevant to the five-week water crisis.

One document reveals that the government did not warn more than half a million residents in Sydney's southern and far south-western suburbs and in the steel city of Wollongong that they were drinking dangerously polluted water last month. When the government belatedly placed three million residents of Sydney on a 'boil water' alert, Wollongong, Campbelltown and Sutherland were supposedly free of the two diarrhoea-causing parasites which breed in human and animal faeces.

But the document shows that 500,000 people whose water comes via the Illawarra, Macarthur and Woronora filtration plants were drinking water that Sydney Water risk management plans say would 'trigger a major incident'. Testing results indicate that cryptosporidium and giardia were present in filtered water at all three plants between September 9 and 11.

Another document reveals that 18 months ago a Sydney Water communications officer advised the corporation that 'it is probably only a matter of time

before there is an outbreak [of cryptosporidium] in Australia'. Urban Affairs and Planning Minister Craig Knowles denied the government was aware of the warning.

When the government released a second consignment of documents this Monday, another crucial fact emerged: the water supply contract signed with the private operator of Sydney's main water treatment plant at Prospect contained no conditions about bacteria levels. Previously it was known that the contract set no standards for giardia and cryptosporidium, but the additional exclusion of bacteriological criteria is a breach of water quality standards established by the National Health and Medical Research Council. This was the first time that the contract with Australian Water Services had been made public.

In the early 1990s the former Liberal state government increasingly privatised the Sydney water system, signing contracts for the building of the privately-controlled Prospect, Illawarra, Macarthur and Woronora plants. None of the contracts obliged the companies to provide safe drinking water, let alone requiring them to filter for giardia and cryptosporidium, even though the technology was available.

An earlier document showed that the authorities knew of the cryptosporidium danger at least seven years ago but decided for cost-cutting reasons not to instal ozonation equipment that could eliminate the parasites. In 1991 a project team told the old Sydney Water Board: 'The indications are that the only process likely to be capable of destroying cryptosporidium under conditions that could be implemented as part of a water treatment plant is ozonation'.

Ozonation was introduced in the American city of Milwaukee after a cryptosporidium outbreak in 1993 killed more than 100 people and made hundreds of

thousands ill. Even then, no such technology was installed when the new privately-run plants were constructed in Sydney. Instead a chlorine filtration plant was built at Prospect, saving an estimated \$25 million.

In his Supreme Court action, Egan argues that the release of a further 5,000 pages of documents could prejudice a class action by consumers against Sydney Water. He has claimed an executive right to suppress the documents on the grounds of legal professional privilege and commercial confidence.

But real reasons for the ongoing coverup lie deeper. The more documents are released, the more they shed light on the drive for profits and dividends pursued by successive Labor and Liberal governments, which led to cost-cutting in all areas. Apart from the inadequate filtration plants, other factors include drastic cuts in staff, including the number of workers carrying out maintenance. In addition, the inner and outer water catchment areas lack vital sewerage treatment facilities and are used for agricultural and mining purposes. Heavy rains flush the wastes from these activities straight into the Warragamba Dam and other reservoirs.

Far from rectifying these problems, the government has still not even ordered the construction of adequate filtration plants. Instead, it has quietly changed the guidelines so that 'boil water' alerts are no longer issued automatically once giardia and cryptosporidium levels reach certain heights.

Last week the government proposed a Water Legislation Amendment (Drinking Water and Corporate Structure) Bill that will effectively strengthen the government's ability to cover up water contamination outbreaks. The Bill gives the Chief Health Officer, an official within the Health Department who works under ministerial direction, sole responsibility for issuing boil water alerts.

See Also:

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