

Workers condemn company over sulphur fumes at West Australian mine

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Mine workers have denounced Western Mining Corporation's disregard for health and safety after five workers were overcome by sulphur dioxide fumes in the past two months at WMC's Kalgoorlie Nickel Smelter in the West Australian Goldfields region.

In the latest incident, two crane drivers had to be hospitalised on May 28, and recently one worker had to have a litre of saline pumped into each eye at the regional hospital to alleviate the pain of sulphur dioxide burns.

Workers have publicly refuted the claims of the smelter's general manager Steve Wickham, who rushed to defend WMC, stating that "the safety of employees is paramount". Wickham declared that WMC had introduced new monitoring systems and was "taking action" to improve safety.

One smelter worker told the local newspaper, the *Kalgoorlie Miner*: "I believe all WMC care about is that they don't want Lost Time Injuries." Referring to the danger that workers could lose their eyesight, he added: "You only have one set of eyes."

He described the terrible effects of sulphur dioxide poisoning: "First up you smell it, it then starts singeing your eyes and then you have fits of coughing. It gets to a stage where you get blurred vision and you can't see. It burns your throat, hits the mucous of your eyes and turns to acid."

Another worker said "cabin fuming" of crane drivers was not uncommon and preventative measures should have been taken long ago. "We believe the air conditioners are sucking the sulphur into the cabins—you're pumping this stuff into what is essentially a sealed cabin." He said there had been "numerous trips to the gatehouse where workers have to get their eyes washed out and sometimes put on oxygen, cranes have been pulled back and this is all due

to fuming".

His wife added: "You're always worrying about their safety." The workers made their comments anonymously for fear of being sacked by the world's third largest nickel producer.

According to the National Pollutant Inventory, sulphur dioxide is hazardous to human health, with a rating of 1.5 on a scale from 1, which is dangerous to human health to 3, extremely dangerous. Immediate short-term effects include severe burnings, as well as blindness if sufficient sulphur dioxide enters an eye and turns into acid. The chemical is also known to cause headaches, anxiety, choking and shortness of breath. Longer-term damage includes respiratory problems, notably asthma, and development problems in unborn children.

In seeking to defend the company, Wickham said it had introduced an acid conversion plant, which turns sulphur dioxide into sulphuric acid, reducing emissions from 98kg per tonne of nickel concentrate processed in 1996-97 to 48kg in 2000. Yet, this reduction has been almost completely offset by increased output of nickel concentrate, from 562,496 tonnes in 1996-97 to 737,244 tonnes in 2000.

A 1999 National Pollution Inventory (NPI) report showed that during six months WMC released 22,700 tonnes of sulphur dioxide into the air in Kalgoorlie and the surrounding region. This far exceeds the NPI's reporting threshold of 100 tonnes per year per individual processing plant—anything over this is considered potentially dangerous.

Moreover, during the same six months, mining companies emitted a total of 103,000 tonnes of sulphur dioxide in the Kalgoorlie area. Normandy Mining's Gidji roaster discharged 68,100 tonnes and the Kanowna Belle Gold Mine, jointly owned by North and

Delta Gold, let off 12,000 tonnes.

The same survey reported the release of 244 tonnes of cyanide compounds. Cyanide is a known poison. Long-term exposure to low levels causes blindness, deafness, vision problems, loss of muscle coordination and many other problems. The study also investigated 88 other dangerous substances, including cancer-causing agents, most of which were found to exceed NPI reporting thresholds.

The health and safety problems in Kalgoorlie have been exacerbated by the felling of millions of trees for larger-scale, open cut mining projects, giving rise to regular and severe dust storms, and the introduction of new processing methods.

During the 1970s and 1980s, technological developments made mining low-grade gold ore profitable. Facilities such as the Gidji roaster heat ore to such a degree that many chemicals become airborne, including sulphur dioxide. Alternative processes are available but they would lessen the gold content, slow down production and lower profits.

State Department of Minerals and Energy officials visited the WMC smelter last month and noted sulphur dioxide fuming incidents on April 19, 24 and 27 and May 24. The Department has reportedly “ordered” management to “rectify the situation”.

Yet, the Department of Environmental Protection, which administers the NPI surveys, has known about the high pollution levels for years, without doing anything to rectify the situation. It works closely with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which has consistently sought to accommodate the profit requirements of the mining companies. For example, the EPA found that Normandy Mining’s Gidji roaster exceeded pollution control levels yet gave the company an exemption.

Authorities finally prosecuted WMC in 1999 for high levels of sulphur dioxide recorded over Kalgoorlie in June 1996, but the action was dismissed in the Magistrates Court and a final Supreme Court appeal has been delayed until July or August this year.

The state government recently removed the Kalgoorlie region’s only permanent Department of Environmental Protection officer. Referring to the Golden Mile open pit, one local resident commented in the *Kalgoorlie Miner*: “We have a big hole in the ground here, the biggest hole in the world, 500 metres

away from where people live and it’s going to get bigger and they are taking away the industry regulators.”

The election of a state Labor government last February has made little difference. Premier Geoff Gallop came to Kalgoorlie three weeks ago, just after the latest incidents, but did not mention the pollution, nor the continuing deaths and accidents in the mining industry.



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