

Government indifference as a second toxic blaze threatens West Australian residents

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Just over a year after the worst toxic chemical fire in West Australian history, state government inaction has allowed another inferno to threaten the lives of residents in Perth, the state capital. A state Labor government has replaced the previous Liberal Party administration, but companies are still being given free rein to operate dangerous facilities, without monitoring them, near working class suburbs.

Despite two near disasters in 12 months, the government has done nothing to stop the establishment of storage facilities containing noxious or inflammable goods without notice to local residents, nor has it instituted regular government safety inspections.

In the early morning of March 7, more than 1.5 tonnes of fireworks exploded at the Cardile fireworks storage facility in Carmel, a Perth outer eastern suburb. Shrapnel was scattered over houses up to 600 metres from the site, shattering windows and damaging roofs. Residents were evacuated from many homes within a kilometre radius. Emergency workers had to check a wide area for unexploded fireworks, some of which could have caused serious injury if handled incorrectly.

The blaze was so intense that explosives experts declared the site “too volatile” for emergency services to enter for several hours. Residents were shocked to learn that they lived only a few hundred metres from a site that had been licensed to store up to 12 tonnes of fireworks. A secondary school is also close by.

The Department of Minerals and Energy (DME), which oversees the regulation and licensing of such sites, had renewed the plant’s licence last year without even visiting the Cardile factory. DME had also approved an increase in the tonnage of fireworks permitted on the site, without informing local authorities.

DME officials admitted that they had no idea of “the

chemicals involved in the fire” or the quantity of explosives present. Under public pressure, they revealed that another 24 depots hold blasting explosives. Their admissions confirmed comments by one DME employee that the department relied heavily upon corporate “self-regulation” and conducted few inspections.

This policy has continued despite the February 2001 inferno at the Hazardous Waste Solutions (HWS) dump at suburban Bellevue, which endangered the lives and health of residents in nearby low-income housing areas. Temperatures reached up to 1200 degrees and sent 44-gallon drums of red-hot waste through the air, landing just short of houses.

Voluntary firefighters, not trained or equipped to fight chemical fires, were instructed to attend a nearby “bushfire,” caused by the initial explosion. Some of the drums that had catapulted through the air burst. Yet the crews worked with no protective apparatuses. Some volunteers bled from the nose or vomited and had to be hospitalised.

The HWS dump was just 500 metres from Bellevue Primary School. The next day, children were allowed to attend school even though storm water drains were still full of toxins. Clean-up staff were not provided with protective clothing until four days after the fire.

The blaze was a product of protracted official indifference to the health and safety of workers and residents. For 10 years, the state government had licensed the site as a recycling plant for chemicals and solvent wastes but in reality it was a stockpile of thousands of drums, many of them leaking. Poisonous waste produced by panel beaters, hospitals and large industrial companies were dumped there.

They included heavy metals, acids, sodium aluminate and polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs, which are

among the world's most toxic chemicals, as well as perchloroethylene, a dry cleaning fluid that is a known carcinogen and which, if burnt, can produce phosgene, a lethal substance.

Government officials clearly knew the true character of the dump. Departments recommended HWS to industry and used the plant themselves. Large quantities of leftover pesticides and herbicides had been collected from farms under an official "Chem Collect" program.

In 1994, under the Liberal government, DME served a one-month safety notice on HWS. But the dispute did not reach court until April 2001, two months after the fire.

In the meantime, in 1999, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) found evidence of "significant soil and groundwater contamination present beneath the site". Toxic water may have entered a regional water table and possibly reached the Leederville aquifer, part of Perth's drinking water system.

The DEP issued three official warnings to HWS to clean up the site or face closure. However, the Liberal government stepped in, fearing that it would be left to rehabilitate the site at a cost of \$1 million. Instead, the Liberals lent Waste Control \$100,000 to keep the site open. "It was the cheapest option," former Environment Minister Cheryl Edwards admitted.

Maintaining this history of official cover-up, a Labor-run parliamentary inquiry has now concluded that the long-term health effects of last year's inferno were minimal. It recommended the establishment of a medical register for local residents, but the register is still not yet functioning. Residents have been told to go to the local hospital or to a doctor for a free blood test, only to find that the doctors know nothing about the proposal. Bellevue Action Group representative Lee Bell accused Health Minister Bob Kucera of misleading residents.

When journalists from the *Four Corners* TV program returned to Bellevue one year after the incident, they reported that the government had abandoned the people whose health may have been affected by the toxic fumes. Residents revealed that no health department officers had visited them.

Former HWS worker Brian Blair told *Four Corners* of chemical spills at the site. In one incident, he had

been pumping an unknown acid. "A lot of things were unlabelled, so we were using this acid to neutralise some other chemicals, just pumping it through these pipes about three to four metres up into the tank, and then the aluminium fittings started to get eaten away by the acid and started spraying out everywhere."

Officially, the cause of the fire is still "unknown". The site's owner, Jeff Claflin, remains the national treasurer of Waste Management Association of Australia, a lobby group that represents industry and government bodies. He has been charged with four breaches of his company's environmental licence, with each count carrying a maximum penalty of only \$62,500, a small sum compared to the health dangers involved.

Ron Jones, spokesman for the Contaminated Sites Alliance, which has been campaigning for the closure of dangerous sites in residential areas, condemned DEP's performance. "Unfortunately people do not know what they are living next to until something goes dramatically wrong," he said.

Confronted with angry former HWS workers, emergency personnel and Bellevue residents, state Premier Geoff Gallop has sought to reassure them with empty platitudes. He was "not happy with the performance of the health, environment and fire and emergency services agencies," he claimed.

Yet, even in the aftermath of the latest fire, the government has maintained the policy of allowing corporate operators to set their own standards. Left in these hands, sites dotted around Perth and other parts of Western Australia will inevitably cause further life-threatening incidents.

No action has even been taken on a damning October 2000 report by Auditor-General Des Pearson, who found gross inadequacies in DME's regulation of explosives and dangerous goods. It is clear that despite warnings from some of its own agencies, public safety is the government's last consideration, while the profit interests of business are its first.



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