

Australian state government set to dredge Melbourne's bay despite opposition

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Under intense pressure from the city's business establishment, the Victorian state Labor government is preparing to carry out a major dredging operation in Port Phillip Bay despite considerable public opposition.

On December 20, the state's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) gave the government a virtual environmental clearance to proceed with the "Channel Deepening Project," which will significantly alter the bay's contours—widening its narrow heads and deepening its shipping channels by more than two metres. This will mean extracting about 40 million cubic square metres of seabed material.

While it is difficult to predict the exact effects, due to the complex interaction between the bay's ecosystem and the numerous communities that surround it, the project has been widely criticised by scientists, as well as local residents. As a result, the government—which is yet to make an official decision—may cynically delay the project's commencement until the end of this year, after the next state election.

Premier Steve Bracks and his ministers have made every attempt to limit public discussion of the official Environmental Effects Statement (EES), published last March. The government-appointed panel that conducted the EES criticised many aspects of the project, including the lack of studies of possible key outcomes, and issued 128 recommendations.

However, the statement suggested that the government could proceed if it first conducted a trial dredge. The government seized upon this proposal, riding roughshod over numerous submissions to the EES panel by members of the public, including serious warnings made by marine scientists.

Intent on pushing ahead, the government defeated a last-ditch legal attempt to halt the trial dredge. The Blue Wedges Coalition, an alliance of 53 community

groups, unsuccessfully sought a court injunction in August to stop the nine-week trial.

The EPA has now declared its satisfaction that the trial, completed in October, followed the appropriate protocols. This is despite the fact that the dredging extracted only 4 percent of the total amount under consideration, yet caused major rock formations to collapse at the head of the bay.

Substantial commercial interests are at stake because Melbourne is Australia's busiest container port, handling some 40 percent of the national cargo. More than half Australia's trade by volume is carried in containers, and the volume has grown fourfold in 25 years. An estimated 30 percent of vessels cannot enter Port Phillip Bay, however, because of its 11.6-metre depth. The planned dredging would increase the depth to 14 metres.

One of the main concerns is that digging up contaminated material from the bottom of the bay will result in toxic pollution. There is no decision yet on where toxic sand will be placed—it may be left to form "islands" of dredged material, with potentially disastrous consequences.

Recent studies have highlighted that areas around the port contain elevated concentrations of copper, nickel, lead, zinc, mercury and petroleum hydrocarbons, as well as the cancer-causing chemical DDT. Dredging may produce plumes of contaminated water.

The Newport Power Station, which provides emergency electricity in case of statewide blackouts, may be affected. It pumps water from near the mouth of the Yarra River to cool its turbines. If the water contained contaminated sediment, such as high levels of sulphide, it could corrode the power plant's tubes.

Studies have shown Port Phillip Bay to be a dynamic and self-sustaining ecosystem, which is healthier and

cleaner than comparable bays near large cities. Its shallowness aids in aeration, and hundreds of species of animals and plants rely on its features to survive. Some 35 times the area of Sydney Harbour, the bay has a 260-kilometre coastline. It is one of Victoria's most heavily used recreational and fishing locations.

Dr Graham Harris, a Commonwealth Scientific and Research Organisation (CSIRO) ecologist, freshwater and marine biologist, conducted a four-year investigation into the bay. It found that the seabed sediments were a hidden component of the ecosystem, where specialised microbes break down wastes and toxins into healthy by-products.

Harris told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "By dredging up the bay, we will see more algal blooms and some will be undoubtedly toxic. These blooms will damage local fishing, as fish cannot be sustained in a toxic environment. By affecting bio-diversity and affecting the sea bed microbes that maintain a clean bay, it could become eutrophic (toxic), with no underwater visibility."

Algal blooms prevent sunlight reaching marine plants, affecting the essential nutrients they need to survive. The end result could be "eutrophication," with the bay's waters becoming thick (like pea-soup), smelly and eventually toxic. Fish would die, and recreational swimming, diving and other activities would cease.

Harris warned that leaving toxic sediments as islands in the bay would stop microbial nitrogen removal, which currently reduces potentially harmful nitrogen into harmless nitrogen gas. The result would effectively increase the annual nitrogen load to the bay by about 250-300 tonnes.

Harris also said no studies had been conducted into the impact of larger ships on bayside traffic and noise. Suburbs near the port already suffer heavy traffic. He pointed to the further dangers of elevated tides. "Even if of a small magnitude, they will impact on the performance of storm drains and other pieces of urban infrastructure and it will be necessary to look carefully at the design criteria to see if there is an increased risk of back flows and flooding during storms and high tides."

The government's drive to implement the dredging project arises from the constant competition to drive down shipping costs. During the 1990s, Australia's

biggest ports—Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Fremantle and Adelaide—all carried out restructuring to lower labour costs, vying to offer ship owners, exporters and importers the cheapest berthing and stevedoring rates.

Under Victoria's previous Liberal government, the Port of Melbourne boasted the lowest shipping prices and used this as a drawcard in bids to attract investment. Since then, however, sections of big business have noted that the drive has stalled. They have called for the deepening of the bay in line with the growing trend toward larger container ships, particularly in Asia.

With globalisation depending on cheap and speedy transportation, the container market has grown nearly three times faster than the world economy. At any one time, more than 3,500 cargo ships are sailing the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian oceans. Most accommodate 6,000 standard container TEUs (a unit measure), but shipping designers are developing models to carry 13,000 TEUs.

During 2005, as part of its efforts to sideline public opposition to the dredging plan, the Bracks government pushed through two extraordinary pieces of legislation. One handed the environment minister more power to approve any major project in the state, overriding the EES process. The other shielded the government from any legal liability stemming from the channel deepening operation. It also limited public access to areas being dredged.

The channel project underscores how far the Victorian government is prepared to go to brush aside even the most basic measures for protecting the environment, and public health and safety, in order to satisfy corporate requirements. The rush to proceed once again exposes the anarchy of the capitalist market, with competing business interests demanding infrastructure to meet their immediate needs without any overall rational, long-term planning and with scant consideration for the impact on people or the environment.



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