

Media release

From the Office of the Environmental Monitor

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NEW MONITORING DATA A BASELINE FOR BAY HEALTH

Environmental Monitor, Mick Bourke, today released the first set of results from the Nutrient Cycling Monitoring Program, providing background information on the health of Port Phillip Bay before dredging.

Mr Bourke said the results from the Department of Sustainability and Environment covered a period from December 2007 to early February 2008 and formed the first of a series of progress reports on nutrient cycling monitoring, a requirement under the Channel Deepening Project's rule book, the Environmental Management Plan.

"The pre-dredging results provide the Office of the Environmental Monitor with valuable background data on Port Phillip Bay's nutrient cycling process," Mr Bourke said.

"The results have been compared to existing data also collected by the Department of Sustainability and Environment over the past five years.

"The results indicate that the Bay continues to be saltier than Bass Strait, as it has been for most of the past six years.

"The high salinity levels can be linked to the prolonged dry period, which has reduced the amount of fresh water entering the Bay that would normally dilute the salt water," he said.

Mr Bourke said the Nutrient Cycling Monitoring Program was one of nine Baywide Monitoring Programs set up to monitor the health of the Bay, focusing on detecting changes outside those that occur naturally.

"The program is designed to detect changes in nutrient cycling efficiency depending on the site and season - changes that are large enough to be of ecological significance," he said.

Nutrient cycling refers to the movement of nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous through an ecosystem. The health of Port Phillip Bay is linked to a finely balanced nutrient cycling process, which removes much of the nitrogen entering the Bay by a process called denitrification.

Mr Bourke said that during the denitrification process, nitrogen entered the water in the form of nutrients, was processed by naturally occurring microscopic plants and animals in the water and on the seabed, and was finally released into the atmosphere as nitrogen gas.

"The Channel Deepening Project's rule book limits how the Project can affect nutrient cycling by setting standards and controls to avoid environmental effects such as the reduction of light," Mr Bourke said.

"It is still early days for the dredging project, but the initial observations from the Nutrient Cycling Monitoring Program provide further baseline information to compare future results.

The information will help us judge if changes to the Bay's ecosystem fall outside those that happen naturally," he said.

“In addition to this monitoring program, the Office will scrutinise the Project’s conformance to the Environmental Controls set out in the rule book. These specify when, where and how dredging can take place and are designed to minimise effects on the Bay’s ecosystem as a whole, including the nutrient cycling process,” Mr Bourke said.

The report and a fact sheet on the Nutrient Cycling Monitoring Program are available at www.oem.vic.gov.au.

Mr Bourke also announced a preliminary examination of turbidity monitoring results from the Port of Melbourne Corporation indicated the Channel Deepening remained within environmental limits.

“Turbidity levels in the north and south of the Bay remain well below the environmental limits set to protect important Bay assets such as seagrass and fish,” Mr Bourke said.

Turbidity results released today by the Port of Melbourne Corporation cover a seven day period from March 17 to 24. Nine buoys located in the south of the Bay and one in the north have monitored turbidity levels continuously since dredging began on February 8.

The Office provides an around-the-clock independent and transparent view on the environmental performance of the Channel Deepening Project.

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