

Toxic Sites in South Australia

Joan Richardson of Kapunda, who built her dream house on land she bought without being told it was the site of an old foundry and a toxic dump, is only one of many people in similar situations. She has been trying for years to get the authorities to recognise and act on the problem but to no avail.

This example of site contamination is one of thousands across South Australia, all the result of bad practices of the past. Most of the information about their whereabouts has been lost, yet each one is a potential risk to the health of all those around, from the workers who build on them to the businesses and staff who work there and the residents who live nearby or even, as in Joan's case, on top of them.

Heavy metals are a major concern, as is well known in Pt Pirie where dust containing heavy metals has been blowing around for decades. The toxins can also seep into the water table, thus polluting water supplies. If the information held historically by governments is lost, not coordinated or simply ignored, then it's the people who suffer, usually unknowingly until dreadful illnesses develop.

Once the sites are recognised, clean-ups are expensive and all the Government can do, if funds are not available for remediation, is provide Health workers to assist workers and families to manage the respiratory and neurological problems that develop.

But do our public authorities adequately consider public safety with regard to environmental hazards? It seems not.

Rules and regulations are clearly inadequate and a vast amount of work is needed on them, so the only way for Councils and Government Departments to operate in the present situation is ETHICALLY.

Work is to need to incorporate ethics procedures to protect people from toxic contaminants and the stress of hidden but slowly developing illnesses.

Local councils and the South Australian Government have to put morality on their administrative agendas. Given the knowledge we now have about these sites being uncovered, it would be negligent for governments to allow its citizens to these kinds of avoidable dangers.

The most vulnerable people in our community, the elderly and the young, are the ones who often inherit this toxic mess through pollutants that have been there for a long time but never identified properly due to irresponsible work processes by individuals, businesses and public authorities. Self-reporting in environmental monitoring do not work. On the contrary, authorities often avoid the issues for reasons simply of self-protection and possible costs.

More commitment and action from Government is now essential. The EPA must be funded to assess what is in our air, soil and water and be enabled to act on the results.

Many sites, especially railway yards, have always been known to be toxic but nothing has been done for so long, especially in mining and factory areas such as at Kapunda, that the problem is now chronic and a looming threat to the current government encouragement of urban sprawl, which is often into old industrial sites.

Health checks need to include funding to check the levels of heavy metals in the blood and consider the implications and cost to our health system.

Toxic sites have become a sleeping giant. The State Government has to take overall responsibility and the United Party will press the issue strongly at the coming State election.

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