

Tarago Public School – Transport for NSW project to remediate lead contamination along rail corridor

Frequently Asked Questions

24 April 2020

Why did the Department engage an independent hygienist?

Following notification by Transport for NSW that lead contamination was discovered along the rail corridor, the Department of Education conducted a separate and additional investigation on the school grounds to be confident that all steps were being taken to safeguard the health and safety of students, teachers and the local community of Tarago Public School.

Who is the hygienist and when did the Department engage them?

At the Department's request, our maintenance contractor engaged an independent hygienist, Greencap Pty Ltd, on 4 March 2020. Greencap carried out its investigation the following day, on 5 March 2020.

What was the hygienist engaged to do?

The hygienist was engaged to conduct initial, targeted lead sampling and a preliminary risk assessment and provide a report and site plan to identify the sampling locations.

What was tested?

There were three areas of lead testing: drinking water; airborne lead and surface lead dust; and soil.

Drinking water

How was drinking water tested?

Drinking water was tested at five locations across the school, including bubblers, and staff room taps. Two sample types were taken: one immediately upon turning on the bubbler or tap; and, after two minutes of flushing the bubbler or tap.

What were the results?

The water samples in the majority of samples returned analysis results approaching or above the adopted action level. The elevated concentrations are manageable and would have a minimal impact on the school's operations when the actions outlined by Greencap are effectively put in place.

What action was recommended?

Greencap referred to NSW Health's information regarding lead in drinking water in schools. As water can dissolve lead and copper from pipes and plumbing fittings when it sits in pipes for extended times school staff are advised to flush their drinking water outlets just before the start of each school term or after extended periods of closure. Additionally, Greencap recommended the use of two sets of bubblers to cease, and that various flushing methods for other bubblers and taps be carried out until further testing could take place.

What action was taken?

The department decided to take additional measures to act above the recommendations. The additional measures included sealing and capping all bubblers and supplying drinking water by bottled water to eliminate any potential risk. School staff have been advised to flush their drinking water outlets before the start of each school term and after extended periods of closure. As lead is not readily absorbed by the body through the skin, washing hands by tap water can continue as usual. The school grounds are being watered from the bore which has been tested and passed.

Airborne lead and surface lead dust

How were airborne lead and surface lead dust tested?

Airborne lead monitors were placed in five locations within school buildings. The monitors were placed on top of a number of cupboards, cabinets and shelves to conduct measurements. Additionally, surface dust lead swabs were conducted on 13 surfaces above 1.8 metres within school buildings. It should be noted that surfaces below 1.8 metres were clear of dust due to regular school cleaning and maintenance activities.

What were the results?

Whilst elevated lead levels were returned from lead swab surface samples above 1.8 m, the air monitoring results were all below the detection limit of the analytical method used and well below the acceptable limit. Taken together, these results indicate that there is a minimal lead exposure risk to staff and students during normal school operations.

What action was recommended?

Greencap recommended the buildings continued use by staff and students. It also recommended that an environmental deep clean of buildings occurred by an accredited contractor, inspected by a hazardous materials consultant, and validated through surface lead swab testing once completed. Greencap recommended that a scheduled program of environmental cleaning be undertaken until the source of the elevated levels is identified and remediated.

What action was taken?

An environmental deep clean of all but one of the buildings has been completed by an accredited contractor. The buildings were then inspected by a hazardous materials consultant and verified through a clearance certificate as suitably clear through lead swab testing. The final building is being cleaned over the Term 1 holidays. A visual clearance has been provided by an independent hygienist with a formal clearance certificate to be provided prior to reoccupation of the school. Regular cleaning and maintenance will now include surfaces over 1.8 metres, with testing to occur three times a year. Should testing return positive results, an environmental deep clean would occur.

Soil

How was soil tested?

Soil samples were taken from 17 locations across the school, including the soil under building windows and from the sports field.

What were the results?

The test results returned concentrations above acceptable limits in four locations: under the windows of the ex-teacher's residence; under the windows of Building B; and two locations under the Library windows. One location under Building A was also found to be approaching acceptable limits. It is most likely the lead contamination has come from paint and putty scrapings from painting works carried out on the heritage buildings in previous years.

What action was recommended?

Greencap recommended that all areas where elevated lead levels were detected should be fenced off and that further sampling take place to better understand the source and spread of lead contamination in the soil. It was further recommended that older paint on buildings should be stabilised and maintained.

What action was taken?

Access to the affected soil areas has been restricted until the soil can be replaced. The Department will remediate all locations identified as having elevated lead levels by completely replacing the soil and regrassing the area over the Term 1 school holidays. Measures to manage painting and maintenance of the heritage buildings will be addressed as part of the 2020/2021 financial year maintenance program, which will address the recommendation above.

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