

Toxic crisis plan under fire

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Victoria's Environment Protection Authority is ill-prepared for another Coode Island-style emergency, an internal EPA report has warned.

The report, obtained by *The Age*, also says there is a serious risk of inexperienced EPA staff being exposed to hazards and dangerous goods, with the authority potentially liable.

It says the EPA does not keep official records on materials to which its staff have been exposed, and that there are also no official decontamination procedures.

Referring to the 1991 fire at the Coode Island chemical storage facility, which sent a cloud of toxic fumes over Melbourne, the report said: "If an incident the scale of Coode Island were to happen again, EPA's response would not be structured or efficient, (and) many decisions would be made on the run."

EPA chairman, Mick Bourke said he did not agree with all issues raised in the report, which was prepared in July last year. He said the EPA had enhanced its emergency response capacity through the employment late last year of an emergency response manager.

"EPA is confident that our present system of emergency response and the skill of our people, continues to meet the needs of the Victorian environment and community," he said.

The report represents the views of EPA officers who work in the emergency response system and the authority's after-hours pollution complaints response system.

EPA officers are responsible for advising the state's emergency services in relation to incidents involving hazardous materials, including industrial or chemical fires, industrial accidents and chemical spills.

The report says it is likely the EPA may be limited in its ability to respond adequately to major incidents occurring over an extended period of time.

It says the EPA may not be able to meet its legal responsibilities and "the environmental impact of an incident may be more widespread".

The authority's emergency response co-ordination system was the only structure in place in the case of a large scale incident, it says. While this system designated the roles and responsibilities of employees, "the majority of staff are not aware of its existence".

Mr Bourke declined to be interviewed by *The Age*, or to elaborate on his statement. The EPA also declined to respond to the report's claim that the emergency system was ill-prepared for a

Coode Island-style incident or whether records were now kept about EPA staff's exposure to hazardous materials.

Colleen Hartland, spokeswoman for the Hazardous Material Action Group, said it was "outrageous" if the EPA did not maintain records on staff exposure to hazardous materials.

She said the public's trust in the EPA had been eroded by the agency's insistence that industry would "do the right thing" by the environment.

"Local residents don't tend to have a good relationship with the EPA because they are so unresponsive, not just on the after-hours stuff, on everything," she said.

"They are incredibly biased towards industry and the concerns of residents are very rarely taken into account."

Peter Marshall, United Firefighters Union national secretary, said he was concerned by the suggestion that the EPA's ability to respond to emergencies could be compromised.

He said the EPA was a "vital cog" in the intertwined emergency response to incidents. "The EPA played a significant role in Coode Island to ensure that the community was not being exposed to toxic plumes that would affect their health and well-being," Mr Marshall said.

"If there has been any downgrading of the capabilities it would not only put our members potentially at risk but it would certainly jeopardise the community because effectively there would be no agency who would be able to do that monitoring. "

But Keith Adamson, deputy chief fire officer of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, said the agencies shared a "good working relationship" and "if the chairman of the EPA tells us that they are capable of supporting us in an emergency then we have to accept his assurances".

The EPA report says there is a high risk of staff attrition among emergency response employees due to low morale. Being part of the response team is voluntary, and is not part of an officer's job description. "The nature of the position requires staff to be on a pager from 5pm to 8am week nights, and all weekend, for a week at a time," it says. "(Staff) are called away from their homes after hours, and placed in potentially hazardous situations for low pay."

The report says it is likely the EPA is unable to meet the expectations of the community or emergency services. While communication with emergency services generally works well, "there are an increasing number of times when EPA hears of an incident via some other means, eg the media".

"The largest issue with the emergency services is the response time of EPA officers," it says.