

Labor knew about toxic water threat



Hats off...Pat Henessy, a farmer who has lived on the Coxs river for more than 50 years, no longer uses the water at home. Photo: Kate Geraghty

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THE State Government knew more than two years ago that a river feeding Sydney's water supply was being contaminated with high levels of toxic metals and poisons including arsenic.

As volunteers testing water samples in the Coxs River near Lithgow began to share their alarming findings with the Sydney Catchment Authority in 2006, the NSW Government was presenting the operators of the coal-fired power station with a "green globe" award for water recycling at a gala event at Parliament House, hosted by the former energy minister Joe Tripodi.

Delta Electricity, the operator of Wallerawang power station, shared the prize with Centennial Coal for a scheme allowing the recycling of 9 billion litres of water from a nearby coal mine for use in the power station - and for release into the Coxs River.

Documents obtained by the *Herald* reveal the authority was worried about water quality near the power station for several years, and warned the Department of Environment and Climate Change, including the then minister, Bob Debus.

"[We are] concerned that there is no requirement for monitoring by Springvale Colliery ... of water pumped from underground workings and transferred into the Sydney drinking water catchment," the catchment authority told the department in 2007, referring to the recycling scheme that won the "green globe" award.

As revealed in the *Herald* yesterday, independent tests on water discharged from the power station have found high levels of heavy metals, including copper, boron, aluminium and arsenic. Aquatic ecosystems in the river have suffered severely, but there is no known risk to human health.

Officials were also concerned. A meeting between departmental and catchment authority staff in 2007 recorded that the situation in the Coxs River "requires action" and concluded that "some licences require monitoring but do not have limits for exceedances".

The environmental licence held by Delta Electricity has been modified in the past two years to reduce some of the discharges and the company had to pay a pollutant fee of \$397,000 for releasing 6500 tonnes of salt into the water in 2007.

But the company is still not required to measure many of the toxic substances identified, and no limits are imposed on many of the metals.

The environment department said last night that aspects of Delta's licence were being reviewed.

The Minister for the Environment, Carmel Tebbutt, said her department was vigilant in monitoring heavy polluters. "The NSW Government has the strictest environmental licensing system in Australia. It is comprehensive and has strong deterrents, with breaches punishable by fines of up to \$5 million or seven years' jail."

Ms Tebbutt said licences were reviewed regularly. In the past year 1800 directions had been issued ordering businesses to change their behaviour. But contamination in parts of Sydney's drinking water catchment may be more widespread than first thought, the most recent audit in 2007 finding that a large proportion of water quality testing sites throughout the entire catchment were questionable.

The report found "nearly 60 per cent of the water quality parameters exceeded [official] guideline values at 40 per cent of locations", a rise on the previous year. Exceeding those guidelines does not necessarily mean the water is polluted or unsafe but that its pollution levels merit more tests.

The Opposition said yesterday that the licence system was not functioning because there was not enough enforcement.

"Apparently, the polluters can pollute as much as they want, provided they measure what they were doing," said the Opposition spokesman for the Blue Mountains, Michael Richardson.

A cattle farmer, Pat Hennessy, who has lived on the Coxs River for more than 50 years, was philosophical. He used to pump river water into the house and use it for drinking; now he uses only bore water. He said he did not know whether the river was contaminated but said he would not like to try drinking it.

"You can't do much about it; you can't close the power station."