

Leak sparks locals' fears

Community wants clear instruction in case of major incident at plant

By Jodi Monaghan

LOCAL residents fear they could be caught off-guard if a large-scale ammonia leak occurred at the Burrup Fertilisers' plant.

They have called on the company to make public its emergency response procedures for nearby communities.

It follows an incident at the plant last Tuesday night believed to have affected workers at neighbouring operations.

Reports indicate at least three workers were overcome by ammonia odours and had to be pulled off the job.

However, Burrup Fertilisers maintains the incident was 'well within the universal parameters' for exposure.

In an email to neighbouring businesses Burrup Fertilisers said field operators detected a maximum reading of ammonia at 10 parts per million (ppm).

"The threshold value for ammonia is 25 ppm over eight hours," company spokesman Wolfgang Jovanovic said.

"10 ppm is well within these universal parameters."

Pilbara News investigations have backed claims ammonia exposure should not have adverse health effects at 10ppm.

But affected workers have reported burning in the nasal passage and skin irritations, symptoms more consistent with exposure to larger concentrations.

"Complaints of irritation and

discomfort begin at 20-25 ppm," according to a nationally recognised Material Safety Data Sheet.

"At 400-700 ppm immediate severe irritation of eyes, nose and throat occurs.

"Brief exposure at 5000 ppm may cause rapid death due to suffocation or fluid on the lungs."

Pilbara News requested Burrup Fertilisers provide it with information regarding the company's emergency procedures.

The only assurances it offered was 'the company has detailed emergency procedures which have been extensively reviewed and approved by external parties and we work in accordance with those approved procedures.'

It would not comment on the possibility of a large-scale release affecting Karratha or Dampier.

The Department of Environment and Conservation confirmed it had received complaints of ammonia odours from concerned Dampier residents.

But FESA Burrup district manager John Newman said it was 'improbable' a leak would impact either town.

"If another incident occurred industries in close proximity to the plant would be more likely to be affected," he said.

"Burrup Fertilisers has done a lot of work talking to their neighbours to make sure they know how to respond if a release occurred.

"They are all aware and have received training in the shelter and place safety system."

It instructs workers to take shelter in a building, close all windows and doors, shut off air-conditioners and place wet towels under the door gaps.

Mr Newman said it was intended to provide people with a habitable environment in the event of a major release until the plume was isolated.

Popular swimming beach Hearsons Cove practically backs onto the plant and it could be affected if a leak occurred.

"If people are swimming at Hearsons and they smell strong ammonia odours it would be sensible to get away from the area," Mr Newman said.

"However, people shouldn't panic and need to remember that ammonia can be smelled at every low concentrations, about three ppm."

Both Burrup Fertilisers and the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection are investigating Tuesday night's incident.

Preliminary results indicate the emissions were the result of an insufficient gas feed to burn up ammonia being vented to their stack flare.

Department of Consumer and Employment Protection advised rumours of dead birds and lizards in the area could not be substantiated.