

Public & Environmental Health Network's statement regarding the George River Water Panel final report

The **George River Water Panel** was commissioned by the Premier, **David Bartlett**, in March 2010 (<http://www.georgeriverwater.org.au/index.aspx?base=4107>) to look at the issues contained in '*Something in the Water*' (ABC1, *Australian Story*, Part 1& 2, Feb 2010 <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/specials/somethingwater/default.htm>).

Their George River Water Panel's terms of reference were to:

1. review the results of the research carried out by Drs Bleaney and Scammell and any other relevant studies;
2. decide whether any further characterisation of toxins in the water and their source or toxicity studies are required to help determine whether the toxicity reported on ABC *Australian Story* represents a significant risk to:
 - Drinking water supplies, in St Helens (or more broadly given that many water catchments in the State will contain significant areas of eucalypts);
 - Shellfish culture in Georges Bay or more broadly, or
 - Aquatic ecosystems.
3. commission or facilitate the undertaking of any such studies by suitably qualified and independent scientists; and
4. provide an interim and final report to the Government on the findings of the review and any further studies carried out. The final report should include recommendations as to any actions or policies arising from the investigation.

The Panel released their findings on 29 June 2010 and announced the next day that as their job was finished, the Panel would disband.

Their findings dismissed the scientific findings of the scientists and laboratories [see Sourcewatch: *Water Toxicity Investigations in the George River catchment in northeast Tasmania* section] involved in the independent research undertaken to try and understand the cause of the oyster anomalies in Georges Bay and the human health anomalies in the St Helens area.

The Panel's findings add weight to the recommendations of the 2004 Percival report¹, which were never implemented.

The Panel's single most important finding is that drinking water catchments are not being managed in a way that ensures the protection of drinking water.

The Panel's recommendations include:

"The issues raised by Australian Story and the subsequent high level of concern in the community are symptomatic of a catchment in which there is a lack of transparency and

¹ Percival 2004 - *Oyster Health in Georges Bay, collation and analysis 2004*

available information about catchment activities and how these activities may impact water quality. These activities include agriculture, forestry, land (including domestic) and marine based activities and activities by local government. The problem is multi-faceted, and includes:

- The lack of one clear responsible entity for coordinated catchment management activities that could conduct independent audits of catchments;
 - A lack of easily accessible records outlining chemical usage from all sources in the catchment;
 - A lack of demonstrable evidence that chemicals in the catchment are being used in an environmentally responsible manner;
 - Degraded areas of the catchment and riparian zone where runoff and contaminants could enter the river and potentially pose a risk to the drinking water supply.
- The Panel recommends that improved and co-ordinated catchment management and administration be considered as a matter of priority and that information on the use of chemicals in the catchment be recorded by all users and records made available as required to assist with catchment monitoring and the security of water supply.”

Drs. Scammell and Bleaney have replied to the Panel’s report reiterating that not only is having toxicants in the raw drinking water unacceptable but that managing the risk of pollution of the raw drinking water must improve.

(<http://tasmaniantimes.com/index.php?/weblog/article/the-panel-appears-to-have-disregarded-data/>)

The editorial in the *Mercury* (1 July 2010) strongly supported the view that catchment management needed urgent reform.

“Now the independent study has again highlighted these issues and it is clear that Tasmania needs an independent body to monitor water quality across the state.”