

Govt scuttles Sydney water algae claims

SOURCE: SBS WORLD NEWS

Friday, 2 November, 2007

http://news.sbs.com.au/worldnewsaustralia/govt_scuttles_sydney_water_algae_claims_134221

The NSW government has scuttled reports that an algae bloom has made half of Sydney's drinking water supply in Warragamba Dam unusable.

A Sydney Catchment Authority report, obtained by News Limited newspapers, states that Sydney water filtration plants are not designed to filter algae.

News Ltd says the inefficiency means the 10 metre deep algae bloom has made 500 billion litres, or half of the dam's water, unusable.

The Sydney Catchment Authority said water from Warragamba was currently being taken from a depth of 48 metres and there was no impending threat to the drinking water supply.

NSW Water Minister Phil Koperberg said only five per cent of Lake Burragarang, the area of water impounded by the dam, is affected by the bloom.

"Very little of the total volume of the water in Warragamba Dam, or Lake Burragarang, is affected," Mr Koperberg told ABC Radio.

"It is in fact about three to four per cent - nowhere near the 50 per cent suggested.

"On current indications we would have enough unaffected water to last Sydney between four and six years."

Sydney Catchment Authority acting chief executive Ian Tanner said the algae bloom posed no threat to Sydney residents.

"It is not toxic at all," Mr Tanner told ABC Radio.

"The water that is coming out of Warragamba Dam, through the water filtration plant at Prospect and other water filtration plants, is absolutely perfectly safe to drink."

He confirmed News Limited reports that the bloom occupies the top 10 to 12 metres of the water but said it stretched about 13km, not 60km as reported.

Algae blooms proliferate in warm waters and only cooler temperatures would reduce its size, he said.

"If there's enough nutrients or food sources in the water it can multiply," Mr Tanner said.

"What we've noticed is that it's become very stable, it's not growing, it is still hanging around and will hang around until the water cools down.

"It's probably going to be closer to early winter or until it runs out of food source."

Warragamba Dam had a maximum depth of 85 metres, allowing water to be taken at even deeper points if conditions required, Mr Tanner said.

Sydney's water supply would be less affected by algae if carbon filters were used, Opposition Leader Barry O'Farrell says.

If a small amount of money was used for carbon filters, instead of desalination, there would be more drinkable water in Warragamba Dam, Mr O'Farrell said.

"In South Australia there is the carbon filter system that would enable this water to be screened, the toxins removed and it be perfectly safe for drinking," Mr O'Farrell told reporters.

Mr O'Farrell said the situation displayed further incompetence by a government minister.

"Less than two weeks ago (water utilities minister) Nathan Rees told a parliamentary estimates committee that the algal bloom was a metre deep," he told reporters.

"The bloom is 10 to 12 metres deep, not the one metre deep the minister for water utilities claimed."

Source: AAP