



Health risks found as infill sewer plan stalls

JANE HAMMOND

There is evidence of serious health and environmental problems from delays and budget cuts to the State's infill sewerage program, a parliamentary inquiry has found.

It found Murray Bend, in the Murray Shire, was so polluted by raw sewage from septic tanks that daily health warnings were posted on the nearby river.

This was repeated across the State, including at Rockingham, where leaking septic tanks threaten endangered living fossils called thrombolites and in Port Hedland where the lack of infill sewerage has stymied development.

The Upper House standing committee on environmental and public affairs inquiry was set up to look into deep sewerage delays at Cockburn but was widened. It tabled its findings yesterday.

The Government has not allocated any money for infill sewerage for at least four years except for emergency works at Cockburn and Spearwood where residents had to empty overflowing backyard septic tanks.

Committee chairman Brian Ellis said the Water Corporation had failed to prioritise an infill sewerage program, preferring to invest in other projects such as a desalination plant.

This was despite the corporation

having a capital works budget this financial year of \$1.1 billion.

The inquiry found problems from not having deep sewers were more serious and widespread than believed previously and an infill program was "of the highest priority".

Department of Water modelling showed pollution from septic tanks into the Peel-Harvey, Swan-Canning, Leschenault and Vasse-Wonnerup estuaries and Geographe Bay caused significant amounts of nutrients and algal blooms and was found in waterways and rivers that discharged into each system.

The program was established in 1994 with a promise to provide 100,000 sewerage connections costing \$800 million over 10 years. In 2001, funding was slashed and the time frame extended to 25 years.

Last May, the program was deferred indefinitely.

Evidence to the inquiry suggested the program would cost \$214 million to finish, \$129 million more than what remained of the original budget.

Mr Ellis said the increased importance of Perth's groundwater made the necessity for deep sewerage more apparent. "Perth has a high level of septic tank use compared with other Australian capitals, increasing the relative health and environmental risks posed by events such as groundwater contamination," he said.