CHANNEL DEEPENING PROJECT

ENVIRONMENT
VICTORIA
AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS 2006

OUR ELECTION COMMITMENT

The health of Port Phillip Bay is a key factor in the high livability rating of Melbourne and Victoria.

The Bay is one of Victoria's natural assets and we, the people, need to respect the myriad of small to large creatures and life support systems that sustain its vitality. Now and into the future, we need to be wiser about our environment's water; wiser than we have been in the past. For this reason, all water use projects in Victoria need to be vigorously assessed in terms of long term sustainability.

The Channel Deepening Project will dredge 40 million cubic metres of sand, clay and rock from the seabed to increase the depth of the channel from its current 12.6m to 14m to allow the new generation of larger ships to transit Port Phillip Bay to the Port of Melbourne.

Based on the assessment so far done on the Channel Deepening Project, the Democrats consider that it is in conflict with long term sustainability and hence, the interests of the people of Victoria. We oppose the project.

The Democrats commitment is to:

- Oppose the channel deepening project.
- Recognise the intrinsic importance of the Bay's ecosystem, respect the current health of the Bay and act to protect the Bay's long term well-being and economy for current and future Victorians.

- Call for a working party to investigate long-term sustainable solutions for shipping in Victoria, which avoid assaults on ecosystems and investigate, for instance, the feasibility of developing Portland as a deep port or developing a cooperative system between all Australian States to best utilise the natural deep ports for large container vessels.
- Conserve natural shallow ports for other, no less important shipping purposes.
- Expand the National Marine Parks in the Bay to ensure the protection of the fishing breeding grounds and their life support systems.
- Promote knowledge about the great diversity of the Bay so that Victorians can appreciate and enjoy this unique treasure.

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Economic Issues

The Project was initially estimated to cost $545 million with projected benefits said to be $1.3 billion. However, of this $1.3 billion only part will benefit Australia with the remainder going to shipping companies and international trading partners. With the delays caused by the trial dredging, and subsequent revised environmental statement, the cost for the project will rise. The economic benefit to Australia will most likely be reduced. This must then be judged against the temporary and in some cases, permanent loss to other industries based around fishing, tourism, diving and general enjoyment of the diverse localities of the Bay.

It is also understood to be only a short-term fix with a life of 25 years after which, the size of ships is expected to increase further making the channel again too shallow for safe transit. Therefore, we believe that alternatives need to be sought that will provide more effective, yet less disruptive planning to commercial shipping needs for Victoria.

Instead of spending public money on a project with a limited lifespan, uncertain economic benefits and which threatens working ecosystems, we should consider other avenues for addressing the needs of Victoria beyond 2030.

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Environmental Issues

There are significant environmental concerns involved in the project. The overall water quality in our bay is dependant on the benthic ecosystem. It remains unclear what long term effect the dredging and resultant turbidity will have on this population. The Bay is relatively shallow over most of its area, which allows marine plants and sea-grasses to utilise photosynthesis for energy. Many seagrass beds are close to proposed dredging regions and the increased water turbidity will result in restricted access to photosynthesis. The outcomes of these effects are unclear but a worst-case scenario could result in eutrophication of the bay.

It is known that the seagrasses close to the dredging areas are home to several threatened marine species including seahorses and seadragons. In addition, the seagrass beds are essential for the regeneration of fish stocks. In turn, this could affect the sustainability of the larger marine animals resident in the Bay including bottlenose dolphins, principally in the southern part of the bay; the penguin colony at St. Kilda; and the seal population which are dependent on fish as their major food source.

Re-suspension of Heavy metals and all classes of pollutants

It is known that the seabed in parts of Port Phillip Bay is contaminated with pollutants from industry and household wastes. These pollutants include toxic chemicals such as chlorinated hydrocarbons, petroleum products, tributyltin (TBT) and dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT). Also present are toxic metals including arsenic, copper, nickel, lead and mercury. The levels of these toxic materials are relatively low in most areas of the bay but are present in higher concentrations around the harbours and near the drains and creek-mouths which flow into the bay. Most of this material is relatively stable in the sediment but occasionally elevated level of pollutants have been noted in fish from the bay.

Preliminary studies from the trial dredging project found higher levels of metals and toxicants within the plume in all locations. Increased dredging by the project would lead to more pollutants being resuspended into the water. This would lead to increased load on the microbenthic population already burdened by the increased sediment and nitrogen load. While some of the pollutants would be toxic to the microbenthics, some would get assimilated into the food chain and pass up through the food chain system. This could lead to toxicity problems for the fish, penguin, seal and dolphin populations which are higher up the food chain as well as the water birds that rely on fish from the bay as their food source. It would also lead to increased levels of toxicants and metals in the fish and seafood that are caught from the bay for human consumption. This would have serious effects for the commercial fishing community as well as potentially affecting the general health of Victorians.

Increased risk of oil spills

The proposed channel deepening plans to deepen the heads to allow the passage of ships with a draft of 14 meters. The average length of ships currently entering the bay is 270 meters but the new generation of ships is expected to be longer. Even with the deepening of the

channel, some of these ships will require correct tidal conditions for entry. The channel at the heads is fairly narrow and this leads to an increased risk of the longer ships crashing or running aground on the nearby reefs. If this was to occur with a ship such as an oil tanker then the environmental damage would be enormous.

Using computer simulations, Port of Melbourne Corporation experts have already found that there is a real risk of large tankers and container ships having a mishap or grounding, particularly if the weather conditions are bad. Even with better weather conditions, experienced pilots and the aid of a 1.5m tide, there were still some mishaps on the computer simulations. If these problems can occur on a computer simulation then we can not risk it happening in a real-life situation. Victoria's history shows that ships can, and do, come to grief while transversing our bay. If one of the large oil tankers were to run aground while entering or within the bay then the environmental costs would be felt for years to come.

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