

Community Open House Event

Bellarine Peninsula cancer concern

April 2019

In response to concerns regarding a potential cancer cluster on the Bellarine Peninsula believed to be related to historical use of the pesticide dieldrin, the Department of Health and Human Services co-ordinated a Community Open House event. This document provides a summary of the event.

The Open House was held on Monday 25 February 2019 at 13th Beach Golf Links in Barwon Heads, and the format was a drop-in session from 3:00pm to 7:00pm. The Open House provided an opportunity for the Bellarine Peninsula community to meet face-to-face with experts from many agencies who could discuss, clarify or provide further information about their questions and concerns. The event was advertised on the City of Greater Geelong website as well as in local media.

Twenty-five government representatives attended, including experts from the Environment Protection Authority, Victorian School Building Authority, Department of Education and Training, Agriculture Victoria, City of Greater Geelong, WorkSafe Victoria and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Forty-five community members attended the event.

Set-up of the event

Agencies were grouped into the following five topic areas and provided a broad range of expertise across public health, veterinary science, council planning, regulation, oncology (cancer), worker safety and environmental protection.

1. School testing

The Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA) and Department of Education and Training (DET) spoke to people about the soil testing they had undertaken at the local schools.

2. Our agricultural past

Agriculture Victoria discussed the historical use of dieldrin and related organochlorines in the Bellarine area. They also discussed the systems in place to manage the past use of chemicals including the implications for farming produce.

3. Local planning

The City of Greater Geelong spoke about the processes and requirements involved in planning and re-zoning land, including the development of farm land into residential zones or schools.

4. Our environment and health

Community members were able to speak with toxicology experts and environmental scientists about dieldrin, its health effects, how it is measured in soil and when and how detailed investigations are triggered. Both the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and WorkSafe Victoria were also able to provide information about testing they had undertaken.

5. Our health

The Chief Health Officer and the Director of the Barwon Health Cancer Service were both present to listen to and speak with community members about cancer, the Chief Health Officer's investigation of cancer rates on the Bellarine Peninsula, and the approaches and complexities when a community is concerned that there is an unusual increase in cancer cases.

Community feedback at the event

All visitors were asked to provide feedback on the event on departure. The majority indicated they felt comfortable and able to participate and that their concerns and issues were understood.

Some of the key concerns identified included:

- methods and limitations of the Chief Health Officer's investigation of cancer rates on the Bellarine Peninsula
- potential spray drift from local golf clubs and maintenance of the Barwon Heads Primary school oval
- the mosquito spraying program in the area, particularly the chemicals and processes used historically
- why there are different health investigation levels in Australia and the USA
- the controls and regulations including for organochlorides

Responses to community concerns have been made available on the City of Greater Geelong website in the Frequently Asked Questions section <https://www.geelongaustralia.com.au/news/item/8d687a5ff8046d9.aspx> and updated following the Open House.

The feedback on the Open House event itself indicated that in general, the open house format was useful, friendly, helpful and effective, and concerns and issues were understood but not always able to be answered.

It is intended that the Open House and follow-up processes are the beginning of an ongoing engagement that keeps communications open and timely.

Next Steps

The Department of Health and Human Services and other agencies are following up directly with those who provided their contact details at the Open House or who make direct enquiries. The Frequently Asked Questions on the City of Greater Geelong website will continue to be updated as needed. Agencies will continue to assess any new information to see what further actions are possible or appropriate. A collaborative approach with the community is encouraged.

Families with specific concerns about clusters of non-communicable diseases such as cancer are advised to contact the Department of Health and Human Services or Cancer Council Victoria as there are established procedures to investigate such matters.

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