

Chemicals in the bay, bird flu “will arrive”: meeting

ENVIRONMENT

There has been an annual increase in the number of chemicals entering Western Port, according to midway findings of a three-year RMIT study.

The RMIT research was presented at a packed public meeting to discuss the current state of Western Port, its challenges and solutions held last week by the Phillip Island Conservation Society.

The meeting, attended by about 120 people at Berninnet, moved a resolution calling on the State Government to fund and implement a plan to protect the bay, its environment and economy.

The meeting also heard from a range of speakers, highlighting the impacts of erosion and sea level rise on Phillip Island, as well as the expected arrival of bird flu here, which is predicted to not only decimate bird populations, but also mammals such as seals.

RMIT environmental researcher Dr David Sharley told the meeting the study “Exploring Unseen Threats” was testing water in Western Port seasonally to the end of 2026 at 16 sites in Western Port and 18 sites in Port Phillip Bay.

David said the study was analysing 457 targeted contaminants while also using broader screening methods capable of detecting tens of thousands of additional chemicals. So far, 98 of these targeted contaminants have been detected across both bays.

He said the top five chemicals detected so far included fungicides and herbicides, with more detections of insecticides in June 2025. Pharmaceuticals – most likely associated with household personal use – were detected in the samples.

“More recently there are new chemicals not seen in the top five before, with industrial chemicals starting to come out in the results,” David said.

“There’s also a change in the frequency of chemicals appearing with a lot more detections in January 2026 compared to the year before.” Average chemical detections were highest around areas with agricultural land uses, with residential areas showing lower detection frequencies.

On the positive side, no chemicals were detected at Stony Creek, opposite Phillip Island.

He said “no single sampling

event” could capture the full range of chemicals, and untangling the chemical interaction with the bay and estuaries was a “big job”.

“The value of repeated seasonal sampling is that it allows us to identify changes over time and build a more complete picture of the chemical mixtures present in the environment.”

David highlighted it was critical to keep pollutants out of stormwater drains, adding households could reduce chemical use, including in the garden and personal care products.

Bird flu

Western Port Biosphere Foundation CEO Mel Barker told the meeting the bay was globally significant and one of its greatest current threats was the inevitable arrival of bird flu.

“It’s not just me saying Western Port is significant. UNESCO and Ramsar are saying it as well – two levels of international recognition, which makes it a unique place on the world stage,” Mel said.

“Very few places around the world have both these.”

She said the key threats to the bay were from climate change, marine pests, industrial development, and increased urbanisation. She said bird flu was a current threat, with 17 cases in Australia at the time of her speech and at that point none in Victoria.

“Bird flu doesn’t just impact birds. In some place 76 per cent of seal pups have died,” she said. “It will come here and this will be one of the places that will be badly impacted.”

Sea level

Fourth generation Phillip Islander and environmental educator Mike Cleeland gave an overview of sea level rise in the bay, highlighting the impacts of both melting sea ice and thermal expansion – “as water gets hotter it gets bigger” – which were both contributing 50/50 to sea level rise.

Mike said Cowes east erosion was long shore drift, where sand is transported along a coastline, with sea level rise “making it worse”. He explained Inverloch was losing 17,000 cubic metres of sand per year and Cowes east was seeing an eastward drift.

In addition to the tide gauge at Stony Point showing a rising trend in sea level, Mike showed evidence the mangrove belt at Surf Beach was migrating in-



Presenters at last week’s meeting on Western Port are, from left: Mike Cleeland, local science educator; Greg Johnson, PICS president and meeting chair; Sheree Marris, producer of Western Port Down Under documentary; Dr David Sharley, RMIT; Mel Barker, Western Port Biosphere; Shannon Hurley, Victorian National Parks Association; Terry Nott, PICS vice president and co-ordinator of Preserve Western Port Action Group (PWP).

land upslope into the saltmarsh and that mangroves around Tooradin were migrating inland up the drainage channels. Both of these observations showed evidence of rising sea level around Western Port.

Mike said the Bruun Rule was a coastal model estimating that a sandy shoreline will retreat landward by 50 to 100 times the amount of sea-level rise.

“So one centimetre of sea level rise will see the shoreline erode by one metre.”

Other speakers included Sheree Marris, who is currently producing a documentary showcasing the bay, Western Port Down Under, which will be released in the new year. “Western Port has a PR problem,” Sheree said.

“Usually when people think of Western Port they think of mud, mangroves and mosquitoes.

“But what we’re doing is showcasing the wonders of Western Port. I had no idea how beautiful it was and I grew up here.”

Victorian National Parks Association’s Shannon Hurley explained the current proposal for a wind turbine manufacturing hub at Hastings revealed a critical gap.

“Western Port has no strategic plan to balance nature conservation and sustainable development,” Shannon said.

“With growing pressures from shipping, pollution, and climate change, we need coordi-

nated planning to avoid ad-hoc decisions and missed opportunities.”

The VNPA and other bay advocacy groups are calling for \$1.2 million to establish the Western Port Bay Framework, which would set out steps and solutions to defend the bay from inappropriate development, pol-

lution and climate change.

The meeting moved a resolution endorsing the importance of the Western Port environment and calling on the State Government to “immediately adopt, fund and implement the Western Port Framework model advocated by the Victorian National Parks Association”.

More paramedics for Cowes

HEALTH

Cowes is set to receive new graduate paramedics, as the State Government announced 53 new paramedics have joined the ranks of Ambulance Victoria.

Cowes and Wonthaggi are two of the regional stations that will see 35 graduate paramedics and five qualified paramedics sent to the regions.

Thirteen graduate paramedics will be placed across Melbourne. The 53 new paramedics will be on the road from August 17. The graduates commenced their four-week induction to Ambulance Victoria this week. The training covers areas such as clinical education, driving, manual handling and occupational violence.

The course builds on the knowledge and experience gained during their three-year university degree. They’ll then begin their on-road training in August – in branches across



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metro and regional Victoria. Minister for Ambulance Services Harriet Shing said the government continues to support paramedics with the “funding, training and support they need to keep providing world-class care in every corner of Victoria”.

Between January and March this year, paramedics responded to nearly 95,000 Code 1 cases.

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