

Ore dump pollution whips up new storm

By [Guy Rogers](#)

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Port Elizabeth Harbour tenants are fighting mad about a new wave of air pollution from Transnet's two manganese ore facilities which is damaging property and business opportunities. It is also a health threat.



Port Elizabeth Deep Sea Angling Club (Pedsac) chairman Richard Donaldson said the situation was intolerable. "Nowhere else in the world would a similar operation be allowed in the middle of a city, especially near major tourist attractions and residential areas.

"The health issues caused by manganese ore dust are enormous," he said. "It is a disgrace that this eyesore and health hazard has been allowed to continue to operate in its present location."

Transnet was asked for comment on Monday morning, 8 January, but had not responded by Tuesday night.

Donaldson said the oily grime left by the manganese dust had harbour businesses, and especially the angling club and yacht club restaurants, at their wits' end. "We fight a never-ending battle trying to keep the buildings, tables and benches clean for patrons," he said. The severe damage to sailing yachts and powerboats in the harbour had resulted in many of the owners relocating their vessels to other ports.

"The manganese dust stains very expensive sails and glass fibre gel coats, and results in a chemical reaction with stainless steel fittings," Donaldson said. "Negative publicity is posted on worldwide forums by crews and families sailing on visiting yachts, who declare our port the dirtiest they have ever seen."

"Many vow never to return, thereby causing financial losses in money that would have been spent on refuelling, restocking of provisions, repairs and visits to local attractions."

Club members with homes in South End were left with filthy walls, curtains and carpets after easterly winds blew the manganese dust up from the harbour.

Donaldson said manganese handling regulations, including on the crucial damping down of the product, were clearly not being followed. "We often see huge plumes of ore dust rising from the conveyors and ship loaders while they are busy loading ships."

He said various factors from bureaucracy to costs appeared to be delaying the long-promised transfer of the manganese facilities to the Port of Ngqura. "This should, however, no longer be tolerated, and Transnet, the National Port Authority and all the stakeholders should spearhead the fast-tracking of the long-overdue relocation of this menacing eyesore," he said.

According to the US state Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, excessive inhalation of manganese dust could be toxic, resulting in illnesses from "inflammation of the respiratory system to impaired lung function and a neurological disorder called manganism that includes tremors, difficulty walking and facial muscle spasms".

National Sea Rescue Institute Port Elizabeth station commander Ian Gray said the institute had an excellent relationship with Transnet, but the manganese pollution was a problem. "There is a constant covering of fine oily residue over the station, which requires ongoing cleaning," he said. "The station deck is a continuous mess."

The NSRI had built a boathouse to protect its vessels, but even with the boats moored inside, manganese dust was still blowing onto them through the grid door and a shield had to be erected to prevent this happening.

Algoa Bay Yacht Club commodore Alan Stratton said the manganese pollution required constant attention, adding a lot to the cleaning bill. He said the situation usually got worse over the festive season as the management of the stockpiles was left to skeleton staff and the regime of damping down the product faltered.

Algoa Bay Sailing Marina's Les Donaldson said the grime that collected on the boats was thick enough to scrape off with a putty knife.

The manganese is transported to Port Elizabeth by train after being mined in the Northern Cape and is ferried to the main facility at the end of the harbour's southeast pier. From this stockpile it is scooped up by reclaimers, deposited on a conveyor belt, shuttled across to the ship moored alongside and guided by booms into the hull. There were various points when dust could billow out unless the produce was properly damped down, Donaldson said.

Both the client and the ship's captain, on the other hand, would be calling for dry produce to eliminate surplus weight and avoid the mess created by wet manganese - and the big clean-out necessary before their return trip with food produce.

To make matters worse, a secondary manganese facility had been established across the harbour basin on the old fresh-produce pier to receive ore trucked in from a transit yard in Swartkops, he said. "So, now, whatever kind of easterly wind is blowing, we're hit by these manganese dust plumes."

The marina's John Tudehope said while Transnet had years ago installed monitoring stations, it had failed to take meaningful action on the data collected. "We're the tenants in this harbour," he said. "We're calling on Transnet as our landlord to please respond, urgently, to our legitimate grievances."

Last month, a Transnet environmental officer was shown evidence of the damage being caused, "but once again nothing has happened", Tudehope said.

MyPE's recent survey on what Port Elizabeth residents thought of the manganese facility attracted a flood of comments. A third of the replies were from affected residents in South End, Richmond Hill, Humewood and Summerstrand, and the rest came from powerboat and yacht owners, according to the survey.

One person wrote: "We can no longer be a cheap dumping ground for Transnet's monstrous mountain of muck.

"Let them make profits elsewhere - PE needs tourism and jobs."

Port manager Rajesh Dana said in September that the facility was due to be transferred to Ngqura in 2023-24. While the dump at the Port Elizabeth Harbour comprised some 5.1-million tonnes of ore, the eventual capacity of the one at Ngqura would be 24-million tonnes, he said.

African penguin experts have warned that Transnet's plan to build an open facility similar to the one at the PE Harbour could be bad news for the endangered species which nests on islands in the area.

Source: Herald

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