

<http://portlincoln.yourguide.com.au/news/local/general/reflecting-on-tuna-industry/1164170.html>

17 January 2008 - 12:32PM

Reflecting on tuna industry

Stacey Dawes

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JUST a cog in the wheel - but a very good wheel - that's how John Isle feels about his time with the Port Lincoln tuna industry.

The "I" in company KIS Tuna has sold some of his quota to partner Sime Sarin and is taking a break from the industry to study interstate for a year, but promises it is not the last Port Lincoln has seen of him.

Reflecting on what is a relatively new industry, Mr Isle speaks proudly of his time in it and how quickly it has become a well-managed, professional industry that has been positive for Port Lincoln.

Not only has it been a huge employer and it's a big industry mainly owned locally, but other spin offs have been in the tourism sector with activities such as swimming with tuna.

"It's an amazing industry for Port Lincoln," he said.

"It's still a good industry to be in because you still get to go out at sea without being away from home too long.

"I feel the town and most the people are better off for it.

"I think it's been an excellent employer."

Mr Isle said it had been good to see unskilled males predominately aged 16-25 hired full-time and given not only a wage, but a career path, with opportunities to be promoted.

In the late 1990s the mining boom did not exist, but the fishing industry was there, providing jobs and income that was not available anywhere else.

"There's been great people involved in getting that and we're lucky to have 90 per cent of them in this town.

"Over the years it's been a great sense of pride to see young, unskilled males work in a full time position, growing, developing and getting qualifications, buying houses, getting married and having children, and putting something back into the community by being a part of the town."

With many other big industries based overseas or in the capital cities, Mr Isle said the fishing industry here was unique in that most of the profits stayed in the city.

"The profits here are repatriated and kept in the town.

"We are lucky for that because it's a big export business.

"I do not think there's many other towns like that, well not that I have seen.

"It's so unique in the sense this multi-million dollar industry is basically owned locally and the money is put back in the town and sometimes I do not think everyone appreciates the huge opportunities it has given Port Lincoln and its young people.

"It has taken away the itinerant workforce and made it a

full time, committed workforce where people can work for higher positions.”

Mr Isle began his fishing career in Western Australia after he left school at the end of Year 10, when the unemployment rate in Australia was about 15 per cent for teenagers.

Mr Isle found work on a prawn trawler and had his 16th birthday at sea.

He was employed in lobster and pearling industries before working for a Norwegian-Australian venture, what was the start of the orange roughy industry.

Later on Mr Isle began employment with MG Kailis, which back then was probably Australia's biggest privately owned fishing company.

In November, 1997 Mr Isle received a call from the company telling him it had bought tuna quota in Port Lincoln, and asking him if he would like to go.

“I had never heard of tuna farming back then. I had seen pictures of boats towing cages in the early days but had never really taken an interest in it,” he said.

But he took the opportunity to move and was general manager for the company.

In August, 2005 negotiations began for Mr Isle, Sime Sarin and Kym Penalurick to take over the business and four months later it was settled and KIS Tuna was formed.

“It was a very good relationship where everyone brought something to the table to kick it off,” Mr Isle said.

“The partners I was lucky enough to have helped me to

mature and fully understand the business because there's a difference between being a manager and an owner."

In his time in the industry, Mr Isle has done all the jobs there is in farming, such as harvesting, diving for mortalities and shovelling sardines.

It was doing his most-hated job of working the platform that led to him coming up with a new, faster and less dangerous way of lifting the fish from the water.

Inventing the fish lifter was the highlight of his time in the industry, and despite people being a little sceptical to start with, other companies now use it.

"I remember when people first saw the machine they thought I was crazy," he said.

Finding a better way to do things was a part of Mr Isle's philosophy of trying to make jobs safer, easier and done faster.

Mr Isle said Port Lincoln and the tuna industry was lucky to receive State and Federal government support in the early stages, and they allowed the industry to grow without much red tape.

Now regulations have been tightened up for a clean, green, long-established business with a good future.

"I think Australian fisheries in general are managed well; I think other parts of the work are not managed as well."

Mr Isle said the industry would still face international pressures such as exchange rates and supply and demand, but it was poised for a bright future being "professional and well managed".

KIS Tuna farm manager Adam Kayser will be stepping up

to take over Mr Isle's position as manager.

Mr Isle said change was a positive thing for the business and it was good to see a local move up through the ranks.

"It's a testament to the business that I was able to step out and someone was able to step in so easily.

"The beauty about change in any job is someone moves up ... it gives the young guys a chance."

The year off will give Mr Isle the chance to study and refocus on his priorities.

Mr Isle's wife Jodie and son Arjay will stay in Port Lincoln while he goes to Western Australia or Tasmania to study.

Before coming to Port Lincoln Mr Isle's fishing career took him around Australia and overseas, but it's Port Lincoln that he calls home.

"It's one of the most beautiful fishing towns I have been to and I have fished around."

Fish with lesions caught in Port Phillip Bay



A lesion-carrying fish caught in Port Phillip Bay.
Photo: EPA

Matthew Burgess
January 17, 2008 - 5:05PM

An investigation has been launched into reports lesion-bearing fish are being caught in Hobsons Bay and Port Phillip Bay.

EPA Victoria and the Department of Primary Industries are investigating reports of several species of fish being caught with lesions on them, including flathead, blowfish, whiting and trevally.

The Department of Human Services is advising people to avoid touching or eating fish that have lesions, or are seemingly lethargic or generally unwell.

The unhealthy fish were reportedly caught in a large area spanning from Port Melbourne to Werribee South, EPA executive director regional services Bruce Dawson said.

"Initial pathology results on the first samples have proven inconclusive, however further results are expected later this week," Mr Dawson said.

"Water samples show no indication of algal bloom conditions and there is no evidence to suggest algae are a contributing factor.

"EPA investigations to date do not indicate a pollution event is the cause, however we will continue to investigate any possible pollution sources."

Department of Primary Industries spokesman Peter Appleford said the analysis may prove inconclusive and it was possible it was a naturally-occurring event.

In 1984, an investigation into a fish showing similar lesions was unable to identify a cause, he said.

"Historically, these events have passed and the stocks recovered," Mr Appleford said.

Mr Appleford said it was possible the fish were stressed by natural environmental variations.

"Port Phillip Bay acts like a large estuary and its waters change to reflect many variables, including rainfall and air temperature. These changes can cause fish to become stressed."

The EPA received one report of the lesions this month, but anecdotal evidence suggested the problem may have been around since December, a spokeswoman for the authority said.

She said the EPA had heard of fish species including cobbler, blowfish, flat head, trevally, ludrick, whiting and bream with lesions.

The EPA only has samples of lesions on blowfish, flathead and cobbler

<http://www.news.com.au/business/story/0,23636,23066387-31037,00.html>

First channel-deepening vessel arrives in Melbourne

January 17, 2008 01:15pm

Article from: AAP

THE first vessel in a \$969 million project to deepen Australia's largest container port will sail into Melbourne today.

The *Black Marlin* transport ship is expected to arrive at the heads of Port Phillip Bay about 3pm (AEDT), before the project begins in two weeks.

The semi-submersible ship will offload four barges, which will be used to carry equipment and dredged material during the project.

They will be joined later this month by the *Queen of the Netherlands* dredger, which is expected to leave Singapore tomorrow.

The vessel will be the main dredger used during the two-year project to deepen Melbourne's shipping channels.

A smaller, trailing hopper suction dredge, the *Cornelius*, will arrive in March.

The arrival of the 175m *Black Marlin* signals the consolidation of 10 years' dredging planning, including two environmental effects statements and the successful defence of a Federal Court challenge.

Protesters, the Blue Wedges Coalition, are still rallying to halt the project - which will allow larger ships to enter Melbourne - and will consider a possible injunction to stop the dredge going ahead.

Victorian Premier John Brumby urged opponents to protest peacefully

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"We've gone through a very long and detailed process in relation to channel deepening and I know there's been a

variety of views on the issue," he said.

"The government has a view that this is the right project for the state ... if we want a strong economy, we want to generate jobs, we want a low unemployment rate, we need to deepen the channel in Port Phillip Bay."

The Port of Melbourne Corporation (PoMC) said the *Black Marlin* was delayed several hours because of inclement weather, but would be highly visible as it anchored in the middle of the bay, about 16km west of Mordialloc.

"The arrival of the vessel is part of PoMC's prudent preparation and commitment to ensuring timely commencement and delivery of the channel-deepening project," the corporation said.

Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett has yet to sign-off on an environmental management plan (EMP) for the project, which he approved late last year subject to strict controls.

A spokeswoman for Mr Garret said the minister would not approve the document until he was satisfied it incorporated those conditions.

The PoMC has consistently said the EMP will be ready and available to the public by the project's start date on February 1

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/climate-watch/counterterrorism-police-seek-meeting-with-bay-activists/2008/01/16/1200419885279.html>



Counter-terrorism police seek meeting with bay activists

Clay Lucas
January 17, 2008

THE plan to dump millions of tonnes of toxic waste in Port Phillip Bay has no federally approved management strategy in place to protect the environment — a fortnight before the project starts.

The Port of Melbourne Corporation is yet to supply final details of its plan to Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett on how it will protect the bay from harm during its \$1 billion channel-deepening project.

The plan has outraged environmentalists, including the Blue Wedges Coalition, which was yesterday contacted by Victoria Police's counter-terrorism unit seeking a meeting.

The Port of Melbourne wants to begin deepening the bay's shipping channels on February 1. It wants to dredge 23 million cubic metres of sand, rock and contaminated silt from the bay's shipping channels — enough to cover an area as big as the Melbourne CBD to the height of an eight-storey building.

The State Government has approved the project, and only Mr Garrett's sign-off on an environmental management plan is required before it proceeds. Staff at Mr Garrett's office said last night that he was still waiting for information from the Port of Melbourne that would show the project was safe.

The Port of Melbourne's channel deepening project manager Nick Easy said the environmental plan would be released "prior to dredging".

The Black Marlin support vessel, which will carry barges that will cart contaminated silt and other spoil, is expected to sail into Port Phillip Bay at 1pm today.

The Port of Melbourne booked that dredge vessel and many others last year — at contracts it says are worth \$1.7 million a week — before gaining approval for the project.

"Proper process has been thrown away," Opposition ports spokesman Dennis Napthine said. "We've virtually got dredging commencing before an environmental plan (is in place). It really makes a farce of the whole process."

The Blue Wedges Coalition, which said it was appalling that the port plan had not yet been made public, was yesterday contacted by Victoria Police's major event planning unit, which includes the police counter-terrorism unit.

Blue Wedges president Jenny Warfe said the policeman who contacted her warned her not to be shocked when she received an email from the counter-terrorism unit. Ms Warfe said it was offensive that the police felt the need to monitor the group's activities. "We have never advocated any illegal protests," she said.

The police were aware of preliminary discussions the group had been having via email and on a Facebook site about an Australia Day protest, she said, which had surprised her. "That sort of monitoring is a bit disturbing."

<http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,23059242-2862,00.html>

Port Phillip Bay dredging steams ahead

Article from: **Herald Sun**

January 16, 2008 12:00am

THE first dredging ship will soon arrive in Port Phillip Bay after environmental campaigners lost a legal fight to stop the controversial channel deepening project.

A Federal Court judge yesterday dismissed an application by Blue Wedges to overturn the Commonwealth Government's approval of the \$969 million scheme.

Port of Melbourne Corporation CEO Stephen Bradford said work in the bay and the Yarra River would begin on February 1.

Mr Bradford said a dredge ship, Queen of the Netherlands, would soon leave Singapore, followed by transport ship Black Marlin.

But Blue Wedges president Jenny Warfe said court action was the first step.

Ms Warfe said an appeal was unlikely, but the group wanted to hear Environment Minister Peter Garrett's reasons for signing off on the plan.

Blue Wedges lawyers confronted Commonwealth QCs in court in a bid to have Mr Garrett's decision declared invalid.

They argued the plans were larger in scale, location, nature and impact than those submitted to the Government in 2002.

Justice Peter Heerey accepted there were differences between the plans but said the action was the same.

"The Approval Decision is lawful. The law does not require the process to be started all over again," Justice Heerey said in a published judgment.

"There is no evidence in this case the federal minister believed that he did not have enough information to make an informed decision."

<http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,23058976-5000117,00.html>

Big guns win bay battle

Article from: **Herald Sun**

Wayne Kayler-Thomson

January 16, 2008 12:00am

YESTERDAY'S Federal Court decision giving the green light to channel-deepening marks the conclusion of a long debate on this issue.

Further delays would have meant that average Victorians would have paid a price in increased costs for the project, more expensive goods, constricted exports, and job losses.

Economically, this project is a no-brainer. Conservatively, it will add \$1.9 billion to \$2.2 billion to the national economy over coming decades.

Not proceeding with channel-deepening would invite an economic decline.

Melbourne has already lost the mantle of being Australia's financial capital, and stood to lose its position as the nation's manufacturing and transport hub.

The Port of Melbourne is also the key international link for many of our rural export industries, which would become less competitive and incur higher freight costs.

The Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry has pushed for channel-deepening since the beginning of this decade.

Melbourne risked being the odd man out among Australia's capital city container ports by not being deepened to 14m.

This is already disrupting shipping schedules, and restricted loadings and cargo diversions add to costs along the supply chain.

Shipping Australia, which represents ship owners and operators, indicated that if channel-deepening did not proceed, a special Melbourne freight charge might apply to imports and exports passing through the Port of Melbourne.

We recognise that most Melburnians love and value the bay, as do we, but the issue must be kept in perspective.

The claim that the bay is "our Franklin River" could not be further from the truth. Unlike the Franklin River, the bay is not a remote, unspoilt wilderness.

Since European settlement, the bay has attracted bathers, yachties, divers, recreational fishers, commercial fishers, and commercial shippers.

The bay has also been dredged many times over the past 150 years, in far less environmentally stringent conditions, yet this has not permanently compromised environmental values.

The supreme irony is that few of us would be around to enjoy the bay today without a viable commercial shipping sector. European settlement was made possible by the development of Melbourne as a commercial port.

The protesters were also confused about offering an alternative to channel-deepening for a growing city of nearly four million people that handles 40 per cent of national container trade.

High-speed rail from Darwin, Fremantle or Brisbane seemed to be their answer.

However, if a ship were to call at Darwin to load and unload Melbourne cargo in, say, 8000 containers, about 30 trains would be required in both directions on a single-track line.

Melbourne currently hosts 3500 ship visits per annum, and this would involve up to 105,000 more trains negotiating their way through our already congested rail system.

Two-and-a-half years ago, the protesters tried to stop trial dredging, claiming it would lead to major environmental disaster.

Needless to say, these predictions were not borne out and two inquiries have declared that the risk of long-term environmental damage is "low to medium".

In any case, an independent environmental monitor will oversee the dredging process.

The facts are that the dredging is necessary to provide a global competitive advantage and economic benefits that are in the state and national interest.

It will be of lasting benefit to the economy and community, long after the protests have been forgotten.

- Wayne Kayler-Thomson is chief executive officer of VECCI

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/deeply-disturbing/2008/01/16/1200419881663.html?page=fullpage#contentswap1>

Deeply disturbing



Illustration: Spooner

Jeremy Loftus-Hills
January 17, 2008

IT IS now the focus of community anger, public protests and a failed Federal Court challenge, but five years ago Port Phillip Bay's channel deepening project sounded like a great idea. In February 2003, the Australian Council for Infrastructure Development trumpeted the benefits. It argued that spending \$200 million on deepening the shipping channel would return \$5.4 billion.

The council knew how to get bang for its lobbying buck. It was a well-connected, globally organised pressure group with an exclusive membership including multinational financial companies and the infamous Halliburton KBR.

In January 2005, *The Age* published an article by Tim Holding, now Minister for Water, in which he wrote: "The Australian Council for Infrastructure Development rates channel deepening as the nation's most valuable infrastructure project, with the potential to add \$14.8 billion to GDP by 2030."

The optimism continued this week, when Victorian chamber of commerce head Wayne Kayler-Thomson claimed the project would add up to \$2.2 billion to the national economy over coming decades — strangely obscuring the impact on the Victorian economy by quoting figures that also refer to interstate and overseas interests.

While the assertions of those heady days reverberate, the council's claims have never withstood scrutiny. The Port of Melbourne was eventually required to clarify the business case for the project. It commissioned NSW maritime economists Meyrick and Associates to complete a strategic assessment and a cost-benefit analysis, which was published in February 2006.

This identified project costs of \$639 million over four years with a gross benefit to Victorians of \$638 million over 30 years. Yet Ports Minister Tim Pallas signed off on the project less than 12 months later, despite announcing that costs had increased by half to \$969 million.

What had happened to the economic benefits? Section 5.3 of the cost-benefit report shows that they are sensitive to changes in interest and exchange rates. Since the original calculations the outlook for both had changed significantly. If 8% is the most likely interest rate, and 90 cents the value of the US dollar, then benefits to Victorians had in fact decreased by almost half — to \$370 million.

Pallas also announced a new surcharge of \$33 on each container to pay for the project. Given the history of such imposts, these new fees will pass immediately to consumers. Therefore, instead of the net benefits originally touted, the channel deepening could end up costing Victorian households \$1.6 billion over the life of the project.

This comes as no surprise to the world's leading maritime economist, Professor Ernst Frankel. "The larger ships are cheaper to run, and can save \$5 or even \$7 per tonne in shipping costs," he explained in a recent television interview, "but to justify the considerable investment in the necessary port infrastructure, you must have volumes much greater than you presently have through your ports in Melbourne. And these large volumes should originate in one or two ports, instead of the half a dozen or so that they presently do."

Congestion limits the expansion of the Port of Melbourne to about 6.5 million containers per year. When this volume approaches — in about 15 years — the Government's ports strategy calls for the development of a second port in Western Port Bay. By comparison, container volumes in the ports of Singapore and Hong Kong will exceed 30 million this year. If the Government has no intention of building a single large-scale port in Melbourne, why does it risk the bay's ecology as toxic sediment is flushed into the bay during dredging? Why put unnecessary pressure on tourist industries, recreational amenity and the operations of the Newport power station? Is it possible that it is the bullying tactics of the global shipping companies, not the promise of greater wealth for Victorians, that is really driving the channel deepening?

In their report, Meyrick and Associates cite cases where shipping companies forced governments to agree to deepen shipping lanes by issuing ultimatums: "Deepen your shipping channels or we'll favour a port in another state." In a sign of trouble brewing in Melbourne, says the report, some shipping companies have for some time refused to carry significant volumes of low-value cargo due to supposedly shallow waters.

If the project is to be as profitable as some maintain, then we could afford world's best dredging technologies, generating no turbidity and removing rather than dispersing river-bed contaminants. The fact that it is not, and that Victorians are being asked to carry all the risk while the benefits flow out of the state, is a sorry outcome for Victoria.

Giving the green light to channel deepening has delivered a convincing win to global interests. During his trip to the Middle East last November, Holding enjoyed the hospitality of the world's most powerful water companies. There's a lot of money to be made from a desalination plant on the Bass Coast, and the water barons are circling.

With two major yet unpopular projects on the books — desalination and dredging — let us hope that Holding and his advisers see through the corporate spin. Now in its ninth year in office, the State Government cannot afford to lose the confidence of Victorians. This will be the inevitable price if it loses the objectivity required to successfully balance the interests of powerful corporations with those of their own constituency and the natural environment.

Jeremy Loftus-Hills is a business educator, an author of management texts and an independent filmmaker.

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/dday-for-bay-as-last-legal-hurdle-falls/2008/01/15/1200159449784.html>

D-day for bay as last legal hurdle falls

Clay Lucas
January 16, 2008



The Queen of the Netherlands during a trial dredge in 2005.
Photo: *Craig Abraham*

THE Queen of the Netherlands dredge will sail into Port Phillip Bay on February 1 to begin the \$1 billion channel-deepening project after environmentalists lost a court battle to halt it.

Federal Court judge Peter Heerey yesterday dismissed an application by the Blue Wedges Coalition to overturn Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett's approval of the project.

Last night, the Blue Wedges Coalition vowed to fight on, potentially with a last-minute legal challenge to another aspect of Mr Garrett's approval.

State Environment Minister Gavin Jennings approved the project late last year.

Under the plan, 23 million cubic metres of sand, rock, clay and contaminated silt will be removed from the ocean floor and dumped into two spoil grounds in the bay.

Opponents said Melburnians who had not paid attention to the project until now would be horrified that the environment ministers had allowed it to proceed.

"They will be appalled by this project once they realise that Gavin Jennings and Peter Garrett have allowed a toxic dump in Port Phillip Bay," Blue Wedges spokeswoman Jenny Warfe said.

"This project will be like the Franklin River: once people see the environment being destroyed before their eyes, the political pressure will never let it continue."

The coalition had argued in the Federal Court last week that Mr Garrett's approval, made five days before Christmas, was invalid.

They argued that the project had changed dramatically since it was first referred to the Howard government in 2002, but Mr Garrett had not taken this into account.

The \$969 million project initially proposed dredging to a depth of two metres, but the Port of Melbourne's dredging contractor Royal Boskalis will now dredge to more than five metres in parts of the bay.

At the entrance to Port Phillip Bay, there are fears that a 50-tonne draghead attached to the Queen of the Netherlands dredge to gouge rock from the Heads will trigger a disintegration process. That process could see the entrance to Port Phillip Bay deepen from its current 14 metres to 22 metres, the Port of Melbourne has said.

The State Government wants Melbourne's shipping channels deepened so that bigger container ships can enter Port Phillip Bay, boosting the economy.

It has made the Port of Melbourne pay a \$100 million bond to guarantee the bay will not be damaged irreparably.

Business groups have been exasperated by delays to the project, first mooted in 1993.

The Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry said the project must go ahead because to keep Victoria competitive.

"We applaud yesterday's decision," said VECCI head Wayne Kayler-Thomson.

The project would add up to \$2.2 billion to the national economy over coming decades, he said.

Mr Jennings promised in December, when approving the project, that dredging would be halted immediately if any "environmental thresholds" were breached.

But yesterday — 16 days before the project begins — it was still unclear what those thresholds are.

The Port of Melbourne Corporation has not released a crucial environmental management plan that must be approved before dredging can begin.

Last night, the state and federal environment ministers blamed each other for not forcing the Port of Melbourne to release the plan. State Government sources blamed the the Port for "dragging its heels".

One senior bureaucrat told *The Age* it was disgraceful that a plan to protect the bay from the potentially devastating environmental consequences was not public.

The Port of Melbourne's channel deepening project director, Nick Easy, would not say when the plan would be released, other than "prior to commencement".

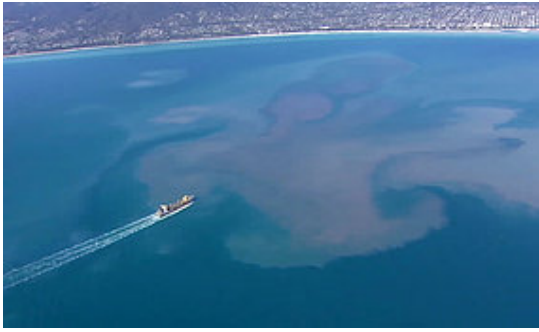
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/01/15/2138969.htm?section=australia>



Federal Court approves bay dredging plan

Posted Tue Jan 15, 2008 3:21pm AEDT

Updated Tue Jan 15, 2008 4:00pm AEDT



Dredging is set to begin in February in Melbourne's Port Phillip Bay. (ABC TV)

- [Map: Melbourne 3000](#)

The Blue Wedges Coalition has lost its last ditch bid to prevent channel deepening in Melbourne's Port Phillip Bay.

The Federal Court in Melbourne has ruled that the Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett's approval of the project was valid.

The Court's decision effectively means the dredging can start on February 1.

Stephen Bradford of the Port of Melbourne Corporation says he is pleased with the court's decision.

"The Court has upheld the lawful decision of the Federal Minister," he said.

"This allows this critical project to Victoria, critical project to the nation, to go forward from early February. We look forward to delivering this critical project before the end of 2009."

Opponents of the \$1 billion project argued Government approval for the project was invalid because it had been significantly expanded since approval was granted.

Jenny Wharfe from the Blue Wedges Coalition says they are unlikely to appeal this decision. But further court action is a possibility.

"We've still got to hear from Mr Garrett as to what his reasons for making his decision are and we await those with great interest. We can go to court about those reasons, we can change our focus of our campaign," she said.

"I don't think we'd want to rule anything out at this stage because Port Phillip Bay is very, very precious."

They are concerned the dredging will harm marine life in the bay and contaminate beaches.

Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett says the court has vindicated his decision to approve the dredging.

"My department would be able to say that the measures and the processes that were undertaken in us looking closely at that Port Phillip Bay project were absolutely appropriate," he said.

"That is now clearly the decision of the court as well."

Thousands of fish wash ashore after floods

Posted Mon Jan 14, 2008 2:15pm AEDT

- [Map: Ballina 2478](#)

Thousands of dead fish have washed up on the banks of the Richmond River since the weekend after the recent floods on the New South Wales North Coast.

The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) says the massive fish kill was caused by a dramatic fall in oxygen levels in the water, which can be attributed to the flooding.

DPI spokesman Marcus Riches says the situation is likely to get worse but the river is yet to be closed to fishing.

"We expect to see a continuation of what's happened over the weekend over the next couple of days," he said.

"As a result of that, we have teams out on the water inspecting the river again. We had teams out on Saturday and Sunday also, so we can get a bit of a picture of the scale of the impact."

Mr Riches says it is not yet known what sort of impact it will have on the local fishing industry.

"The next few days monitoring will help us make that assessment," he said.

"At this point, there is no closure in place. However, over the next few days, we'll certainly be talking to the wild harvest division of DPI and they'll be making a determination then."

Commercial fishers fear their operations on the Richmond River will be shut down for several months.

John Gallagher, from the Ballina Fishermen's Co-op, says a lack of oxygen in the water has left the river stinking and lifeless.

Mr Gallagher says it is the worst fish kill he has seen since 2001.

"It's disgraceful and it is shocking. It's heart-wrenching," he said.

"We're on the river just below Pimlico Island and the amount of prawns on the western-side bank - it is disgraceful to see them. It brings tears to your eyes, really does."

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/welcome-to-the-mad-hatters-tea-party/2008/01/11/1199988585647.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1>

Welcome to the Mad Hatter's tea party

Tracee Hutchison
January 12, 2008

IT'S A bizarre set of circumstances when the federal Environment Minister appears in the Federal Court arguing for a project that even those closest to it admit will be an environmental disaster. Even stranger when the minister enlists the services of Alice in Wonderland to help argue his case.

Not that the Environment Minister, Peter Garrett, was actually in the Federal Court this week to spin the Port of Melbourne's fairytale on its planned dredging of Port Phillip Bay. Oh, no. This Environment Minister left it to his lawyer to tell the people who care about protecting the bay's environment that gouging a whopping crevice into the sea floor will cause a permanent rise in the tide level.

Apparently this Environment Minister isn't bothered by permanent tide rises. That must be why part of his portfolio was given to his younger colleague, Penny Wong. But Wong was nowhere to be seen either this week — just lawyers and a bunch of committed environmentalists who must have felt as if they'd fallen down a rabbit hole.

But it was a tremendous performance by the Commonwealth, which did its best Lewis Carroll impersonation by backing up the Port of Melbourne's premise that it was perfectly OK for the feds to approve the project based on the port's 2002 proposal — that says nothing of rising sea levels or underwater toxic waste dumps — even though the project has morphed into something much bigger.

(That 2002 proposal, by the way, doesn't even use the word dredging. Amazing, isn't it? Apparently there's a legal loophole that means the port doesn't have to get its new plans — the real plans that will see millions of cubic metres of sand, silt and rock ripped from Port Phillip Bay and dumped in two spoil grounds in the bay — approved by the federal minister. That's what the court challenge was all about. It's a bit convoluted, I know, but that's when the lawyer for the feds starting referring to Alice in Wonderland.)

As you can imagine, it was all getting pretty fanciful in court by this stage. Especially when the presiding judge indicated that an elephant had wandered into the room. It was an elephant called dredging but no one dared speak its name for fear the courtroom would descend into a Mad Hatter's tea party.

It all but did, anyway, descend into a Mad Hatter's tea party. The federal Environment Minister's lawyer got on a roll and went on to describe a worst-case scenario, outlining what would happen if the Heads disintegrate.

At least it was an "if", although I can't be completely sure that it wasn't a "when" as the worm wasn't on hand to give advice. But apparently, in that happy event, tides would extend from three to 25 metres deeper inland in some sections. Well, knock me over with a looking glass. Who needs climate change when you can dredge the bay? That must be the other reason the federal Environment Minister doesn't have it in his portfolio.

But it was a terrific in-absentia performance from Garrett, who, in a spectacular demonstration of the adage that timing is everything, announced a ban on plastic bags the same day the fate of the bay was being decided. Now, this really was tremendous stuff. And it was terrific to learn that the minister really is concerned about the bay's colony of fur seals getting those hideous things wrapped around their necks. The small problem of replacing the errant plastic bags with a couple of toxic waste dumps in the bay was just a minor detail.

But this Environment Minister isn't big on detail. What else can explain the three weeks it took him to realise he'd referred to Western Port Bay in his approval statement about dredging in Port Phillip Bay? It would have made a Cheshire Cat proud.

And where did our esteemed Environment Minister disappear to this week? Oh, he jumped on a joy flight to Antarctica. Apparently to check on the rising sea levels.

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

Just like Alice when she gets greedy and eats that nasty bit of cake, the port's plans have got bigger and bigger. And just like Alice, the port will leave behind a salty pool of tears for the rest of us to swim in.

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