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NSW Health Study confirms smoggy M5 East tunnel is a Health Hazard

The Health Department's long overdue study into the health risks to drivers using the M5 East tunnel has confirmed what thousands of drivers and many health experts have been saying for nearly two years. Anyone, particularly asthmatics, spending more than a total of 15 minutes a day in the tunnel are putting their health at risk.

The study confirms that the air quality standards and monitoring systems in place are inappropriate and inadequate. The M5 East's operators do not currently need to monitor benzene or particles, but only carbon monoxide levels, so as far as they are concerned, it is not a problem they have to deal with.

Evidence on oath from the RTA and its consultant (Craig Burrell, Hyder) at last year's Parliamentary Inquiry into the M5 East tunnel showed that particle levels inside the tunnel are regularly 50 times the pollution limits for ambient air. According to the RTA, particles are only a problem if they reduce visibility but particle pollution is now known to cause a host of long and short term health problems associated with the lungs, including asthma. Diesel exhaust, which makes up most of the emissions is a cause of lung cancer.

At the inquiry, a number of reputable independent air quality and health experts such as the CSIRO Chief Scientist, Dr Peter Manins declared the tunnel to be a serious health risk for drivers, especially regular users.

The Health study fails to examine the long and short term effects to such high levels of particles, and the combined effect of the toxic cocktail of all the pollutants. It is not good enough, in 2003 for motorists to be just advised to avoid using the \$800 million tunnel if it is congested, or they suffer from asthma, or if they are in open vehicles or riding a motor bike.

The M5 East is one of the world's longest tunnels, is now carrying 20% more trucks and cars than originally planned. The EPA has the power, under condition 70 to require the RTA to "implement any reasonable requirement to improve in-tunnel air quality".

The RTA and its regulator, PlanningNSW, have promised that the conditions of approval will be strictly enforced to protect our health. The RTA has repeatedly (and wrongly) claimed that electrostatic precipitators were primarily used to improve in-tunnel conditions.

Thousands of people are being daily sickened by the spin-doctoring and bureaucratic buckpassing between the different departments. We call on Premier Bob Carr, to exercise his duty of care to the public and immediately install proven filtration systems inside the tunnel to protect the health of drivers as well as residents who have to live with the toxic fumes from the single Turrella stack. It's time to clear the air.

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