

Parasites in canal, but water is safe to drink



Concerns ... the canal above Warragamba Dam.

Photo: *Bob Pearce*

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LOW levels of dangerous giardia and cryptosporidium parasites have been found in the Upper Canal of Sydney's water supply feeding Prospect Reservoir, health officials have confirmed.

The NSW Climate Change, Environment and Water Minister, Phil Koperberg, said yesterday he had been told that "minuscule" amounts of cryptosporidium and giardia had been detected in the Upper Canal, which feeds water from the smaller dams south of the city into the Prospect filtration plant.

Mr Koperberg stressed there was no risk to public health.

The parasites are believed to have been washed into the canal after the heavy rainfall over the past two weeks. Giardia can cause intestinal illnesses.

The Government revealed on Wednesday that drinking water supplies might need to be switched from the main Warragamba Dam and sourced from the Prospect Reservoir after the discovery of a large plume of polluted murky water. A plume first entered the dam on June 20, the second five days later.

Prospect Reservoir holds a three-week supply of water.

Mr Koperberg said the cloudy plume, which does not contain any pathogens, had settled overnight. But he said test results revealed that untreated water from the canal had returned very low levels of cryptosporidium and giardia.

Much higher levels of the parasites in Sydney's water in 1998 forced Sydneysiders to boil their drinking water for about three months.

Mr Koperberg said the canal had been drained for maintenance for three weeks and the contaminants had been discovered during testing after it was replenished. They were contained to untreated water only and were successfully removed during filtration, he said.

"I remain confident based on the expert advice I have received that there's been no change in the quality of the water you and I drink," Mr Koperberg said.

He described the contamination as "routine" and well within the capability of the Sydney Catchment Authority to neutralise.

NSW Deputy Chief Health Officer, Kerry Chant, stressed there was no threat to public health from the plume or the contaminants.

"It should be stressed that cryptosporidium and giardia have not been detected in the treated water supplied from the water filtration plants," Dr Chant said.

"The cryptosporidium and gardia have only been found in the untreated water in very low levels.

"Further sampling is taking place today and the authority continues to work closely with Sydney Water and NSW Health."

The authority's chief executive, Graeme Head, said adjustments would be made to the system if necessary to ensure the best quality water available was supplied for treatment. "The turbidity levels in the water being supplied from both the Upper Canal and Warragamba Dam remain well within the levels that can be managed by the treatment plant," Mr Head said.

But the Opposition Leader, Barry O'Farrell, said the Lemma Government failed to deliver a world class filtration system following the 1998 water contamination crisis.

"History is repeating itself when in 1998 drought-breaking rains contaminated our water supply, yet nine years later Labor has still failed to install a world-class filtration system," he said.

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