



Monday, 11 August 2025

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
Department of the Senate
PO BOX 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

To Whom It May Concern

RE: INQUIRY INTO ALGAL BLOOMS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The City of Victor Harbor welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Senate Inquiry into the causes, frequency, scale and duration of recent algal blooms in South Australian marine and coastal environments.

Victor Harbor is a key regional coastal centre located within an hour from the Adelaide CBD with a population of around 16,800 and a significantly larger seasonal visitor base. Our community is closely connected to the marine environment economically, socially and culturally.

The March 2025 algal bloom event had considerable ecological, reputational and operational impacts on our region. This submission outlines Council's response in line with the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, the observed impacts on our community, and recommendations for improving future coordination, monitoring and resilience.

(a) Contributing Environmental, Land Management or Water Quality Factors

In March 2025, Council first became aware of marine life deaths, coastal foam and reports of respiratory irritation via media coverage. Advice from the EPA, PIRSA and SA Health later identified the likely cause as a microalgal bloom (*Karenia mikimotoi*), triggered by high sea surface temperatures and calm ocean conditions.

Council notes that extreme marine heat events are becoming more frequent, likely linked to climate change. There is a clear need to better understand how regional ocean conditions and climate patterns contribute to harmful algal blooms.

(b) Ecological, Economic, Cultural and Social Impacts

Locally, the bloom caused fish deaths and foam build-up on beaches. While the full environmental impact is still being assessed, residents expressed concern for vulnerable species such as rays and leafy sea dragons. Encouragingly, marine mammals did not appear affected, with frequent whale sightings early in the 2025 whale season which runs from May to October and is an important driver of the region's Winter visitation.

The bloom coincided with a seasonal tourism downturn, making the impact on local businesses harder to quantify. However, some disruptions were significant. The Victor Harbor Horse Drawn Tram, a major attraction, was suspended for several weeks due to health concerns for the horses and staff from airborne particles. Visitor Centre records showed a 35 percent drop in visitation in the second quarter of 2025 compared to the previous year, although sales revenue remained relatively stable.

Community wellbeing was also affected. Residents, including those living inland, reported eye and respiratory irritation. Council received a high number of enquiries, but inconsistent and delayed information from State agencies made it difficult to respond confidently. Misinformation and media speculation during the initial stages of the bloom event further heightened confusion and may have longer-term impacts on visitation.

(c) Coordination of Government Responses

While Council acknowledges the swift closure of some beaches by the Department for Environment and Water (DEW), the broader response was fragmented. Council was not formally notified in the early stages and had to seek information directly from EPA, PIRSA and SA Health.

There was no clear lead agency, and public messaging was inconsistent. Health advice focused solely on human safety, while residents were equally concerned about marine life and environmental health.

Council believes a coordinated multi-agency response framework is urgently needed to ensure that clear, timely and science-led information is shared with local governments and communities from the outset of environmental incidents.

(d) Support and Recovery Arrangements

Despite the severity of the algal bloom's impacts on coastal communities, there was a noticeable delay in the State Government's response in acknowledging and addressing the broader consequences.

Local councils, including the City of Victor Harbor, received limited guidance or support during the critical early stages of the event and were left to manage community concerns, health enquiries, and reputational risks with minimal coordination or communication from relevant authorities. It was only after the bloom had spread significantly and gained wider media attention that more formal recognition and response

mechanisms were discussed. This delay hampered the ability of councils and local businesses to respond effectively and has highlighted a need for earlier engagement, clearer communication channels, and more inclusive crisis management frameworks that recognise the full extent of environmental, economic, and social impacts on regional communities.

It is important to emphasise that while the recent response efforts have rightly prioritised the fisheries sector due to its significant exposure and losses, regional tourism, which is equally vital to the economic and social fabric of many coastal communities, has received minimal direct support.

Local tourism operators have largely been left to manage public concerns, reputational impacts, and recovery efforts on their own. The absence of a coordinated, tourism-focused response has led to inconsistencies in communication and uncertainty for businesses. Establishing a clear, government-supported framework for tourism-led response and recovery is essential to ensure timely, consistent, and equitable support across all affected regions during future marine environmental events.

Council strongly supports a state led tourism recovery campaign to help rebuild confidence ahead of the peak summer season.

(e) Long-Term Monitoring, Forecasting and Prevention Strategies

Recognising the need for better local ocean data, the City of Victor Harbor partnered with Flinders University, SARDI and the Coast Protection Board to install real-time ocean monitoring equipment in Encounter Bay and the Southern Ocean.

In March 2025, Council co-funded the deployment of metocean buoys, which collect live data on wave height, direction, sea surface temperature, wind conditions and barometric pressure. This information is publicly available via www.sawaves.org and supports:

- Local decision-making
- Marine safety
- Research
- Tourism
- Coastal asset planning

This initiative, supported by a jointly funded PhD research program, fills a long-standing data gap and is a model for how councils and research institutions can work together to build resilience.

However, broader investment and consistent government support are needed to scale this kind of monitoring across the state and provide councils with the tools to anticipate and respond to environmental changes.

The March 2025 algal bloom event exposed gaps in how we monitor, communicate and respond to marine environmental events. The City of Victor Harbor recommends the following actions:

- Develop a coordinated communication framework led by state and federal agencies, with clear messaging and early local government notification.
- Recognise local councils as key stakeholders in environmental incident response, with defined contacts and information pathways.
- Provide recovery support, including targeted marketing campaigns, to rebuild public confidence in affected coastal communities.
- Invest in real-time ocean monitoring infrastructure and support research partnerships to improve forecasting and inform long-term planning.

These steps will help improve regional resilience and ensure more effective, locally informed responses to future marine events.

The City of Victor Harbor thanks the Committee for its consideration and is available to participate further in this inquiry.

Yours sincerely

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Chief Executive Officer