Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee
Answers to questions on notice
Environment portfolio

Question No: 17

Hearing: Additional Estimates

Outcome: Outcome 3

Programme: Australian Antarctic Division

Topic: Wilkes Station legacy waste

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Question Date: 24 February 2014

Question Type: Spoken

Senator Waters asked:

Senator WATERS: But that there was also build-up in local plants and animals. That is incredibly alarming and I am disturbed that funding is not being provided to address those effects, at least to monitor them and to turbo charge that scientific remediation program such that you can actually stop those environmental effects.
Dr Fleming: We have been looking at the sediments. I cannot provide the detail of that sediment analysis. I could provide it in due course.
Senator WATERS: Thank you. If you could take that on notice, that would be great.

Answer:

The Human Impacts Research Programme (now Terrestrial and Nearshore Ecosystems) at the Australian Antarctic Division completed a comprehensive ecosystem impact assessment around the Casey region, including Wilkes, in the late 1990s. Between 2000 and 2005 these findings were published in the scientific literature. The studies, which included marine sediment analyses, demonstrated that the old Thala Valley waste disposal site and Wilkes were priorities for remediation.

Thala Valley was identified as the immediate priority because it was smaller and had already been disturbed by superficial clean-up in 1995-96. The full clean-up of Thala Valley, which commenced in 2003-04 and was completed in 2009-10, included a scientific remediation program to solve the practical challenges of how to clean-up such sites in Antarctica. The experience gained from remediating Thala Valley is sufficient to inform decision making on the management of Wilkes.

Since then the programme has kept a watching brief on the area through ad hoc sampling and analysis of sediments. Our priority has been to focus effort on remediation activities that deliver environmental improvements rather than investing significant effort in further detailed monitoring. Sediment samples will be collected in the Casey region next Antarctic season (2014-15) for monitoring, including in the vicinity of Wilkes. These will be comparable with previous samples and will be used to determine any trends.