

Spencer Gulf a 'giant experiment'



Member for Flinders Liz Penfold explores the pristine waters of the gulf

Melissa Mack

A LEADING South Australian biologist has warned against over-development on the upper Spencer Gulf, which is poised to become one of the state's industrial hot zones.

Biologist Dr Toby Bolton, from Flinders University's School of Biological Sciences, said the Gulf's unique oceanography is under threat.

"The concern with the proposed desalination plant is that there's no way of knowing what the impact would be. It is essentially a giant experiment," he said.

Dr Bolton, a diving officer and operations manager at the Lincoln Marine Science Centre, said water discharged from the plant would be saltier and denser than the natural gulf.

"The discharge could sit on the bottom of the sea, and it is unknown how it is going to

behave. There is limited data on the oceanography of that area," he said.

The State Government is sponsoring industrial development on the upper Spencer Gulf. The Land Management Corporation provides land for Port Bonython Fuels to establish a rail corridor, a storage site for 80 million litres of diesel and a new distribution terminal and oil refinery.

Member for Flinders Liz Penfold welcomes the economic expansion but not at the expense of the environment.

"The tank farm, oil refinery, iron ore port and associated shipping and large scale desalination plant planned for Spencer Gulf are in my view incompatible with its environmental survival as a fish nursery and pristine marine environments," she said.

Shipping from Whyalla is expected to increase by 300 per

cent, which combined with the desalination plant will, according to Ms Penfold, pose an increased environmental risk to the fishing, aquaculture and tourism industries.

"There needs to be an environmental look at the whole of the project and the whole issue of the head of the gulf," she said.

"We don't know how quickly the desalination's discharge can be diffused. There are quite big tidal flows but there isn't a large amount of exchange of water to the open sea."

According to Ms Penfold the top end of the Spencer Gulf is convenient for BHP Billiton, Santos and Port Bonython Fuels, and the Government.

"It is not the best location for activities that should be located in more open waters, well away from cuttlefish, prawn breeding grounds and the kingfish farms,

which could be wiped out with one accident," she said.

She said there were alternatives, such as building another port to export the hinterland's iron ore, rather than using Port Bonython.

She said such a new deep-water port could be connected by rail to the planned southern Eyre Peninsula mines.

Ms Penfold wants the proposed desalination plants at Ceduna and Port Augusta to be built at more environmentally appropriate sites around the SA coast.

"The water for BHP Billiton's expansion should be sourced from a large desalination plant on the west coast of Eyre Peninsula or an expansion of the desalination plant proposed at Port Augusta," she said.

Results of an environmental impact study on the Port Bonython development are expected mid-year.