

Mustard gas dumped

By JOANNA MATHER

MUSTARD gas munitions dumped in the ocean off Townsville after World War II are unlikely to have had a significant effect on the environment, the Department of Defence says.

A weekend newspaper report which highlighted chemical weapons dumping in Australian waters decades ago has sparked local concern for public safety and the environment.

According to the *Weekend Australian*, two dump sites for 700 mustard-charged 30kg bombs and 320 45kg bombs, plus two other designated dump sites, are off Townsville.

The report prompted Townsville

Hundreds of chemical weapons in our waters

MP Mike Reynolds to demand federal agencies reveal what they know about the disposal of chemical munitions and their effect on ocean ecology.

North Queensland Conservation Council co-ordinator James McLellan was concerned trawlers or seismic testing could disturb ordnance.

He called for an investigation into the exact location of dumped weapons.

A statement issue by the Department of Defence said since World War II only two canisters of mustard gas had been recovered and if more were found they would probably be disposed of. However, it was likely the gas would have dispersed in sea water long ago, the statement said.

Mr Reynolds said it was common knowledge the waters off Townsville had been a dumping

ground for bombs and ammunition following the war.

“But to my knowledge there has never been a suggestion until now that chemical weapons were included,” he said.

But the defence statement said information relating to historical mustard gas dumping – including the Chemical Warfare Agent report referred to in the *Weekend Australian* article – had been posted on the Australian Hydrographic Office website since January 2000. It said the data had also been published through Notices to Mariners since 1982 and attracted attention from the press several times since it was first reported in 1945.

It said the last dumping of a small quantity of mustard gas used for chemical defence training purposes was in 1970 and that mustard gas would dissolve and break down close to the dump site.

“The resultant products are relatively non-toxic, and will be rapidly diluted by ocean currents, so would not have a significant effect on the marine environment,” it said.

A spokeswoman for Environment Minister Dr David Kemp made the same comment.

A Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority spokesman said staff appeared not to be aware of the dumps.