

Fears of coastal mustard gas leak

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THOUSANDS of tonnes of mustard gas and other chemical weapons dumped off Victoria's coast after World War II have begun to leak.

Fearing an ecological disaster, the State Government has ordered the Environment Protection Authority to investigate what impact a spill would have.

A spokesman for Environment Minister Sherryl Oarbutt said the Government also wanted full details from the Defence Department about what chemicals were dumped in Bass Strait, and where.

"We will be asking the Department of Defence for full disclosure on what types of chemicals are down there and exact lo-

cations," the spokesman said.

"We want a full investigation of where these chemicals have been dumped and a commitment from the Federal Government for a clean-up if required.

"We need a full and open dialogue with the Federal Government on this issue to ensure our waters remain clear of dangerous chemical contamination."

Greenpeace spokesman Matt Ruchel said it was inexcusable for the Federal Government to allow drums of dangerous chemicals to rot on the seabed for decades.

"What we have are toxic time bombs ticking in the ocean off the coast of Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland,"

he said.

"We need to know exactly what's down there and where."

For decades, the Department of Defence has refused to release details about the 13,000 tonnes of chemical weapons dumped off the coast of Australia after World War II.

But a Defence Department report, Chemical Warfare Agent Sea Dumping off Australia, revealed that the United States military and the Australian airforce and army each controlled mustard gas stockpiles in Australia.

The report said mustard gas and other chemical weapons were loaded on to a navy vessel at Williamstown in late 1948 and dumped about 100 kms west of King

Island.

The report recommended that the dumped weapons be left untouched with the gas expected to react with sea water to form hydrochloric acid.

It said there was minimal risk to sea life and humans, but it is believed a barrel leaking mustard gas was hauled on board a trawler in 1983 off the Queensland coast.

There have also been cases of fishermen suffering burns after accidental exposure to chemical warfare agents.

Documents obtained under FOI show that as recently as 1970, chemical weapons were still being dumped off Australia's coast.