

Safety study of toxic sea sites sacked

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THOUSANDS of tonnes of chemical weapons which were dumped off Australia's east coast after World War II have started to leak.

More than 8000 tonnes of Chemical Warfare Agents were dumped west of Cape Moreton by the US Army in 1945.

The CWAs included mustard gas and tear gas.

However, the exact location of the dump was never properly recorded.

It is thought several barrels floated away.

It is also believed another of the barrels was hauled aboard a trawler in 1983.

Smaller quantities of CWAs were dumped off north Queensland, NSW and Victoria.

Yet another dump is thought to exist off the Northern Territory.

Defence Department bureaucrat Geoff Plunkett revealed the approximate location of the dumps in 2000 after a five-year battle with government red tape.

Mr Plunkett was formerly with the Federal Government's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The *Courier-Mail* has learned Mr Plunkett has been unable to complete a follow-up study on the dumps despite evidence the barrels were deteriorating.

In 1998, Mr Plunkett sought approval for he and NSW EPA officer Theresa Manning to study the smaller Sydney dump and assess the threat posed by the CWAs.

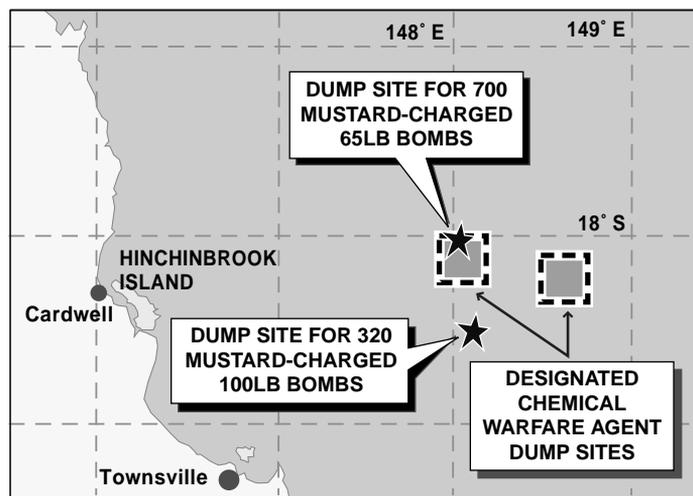
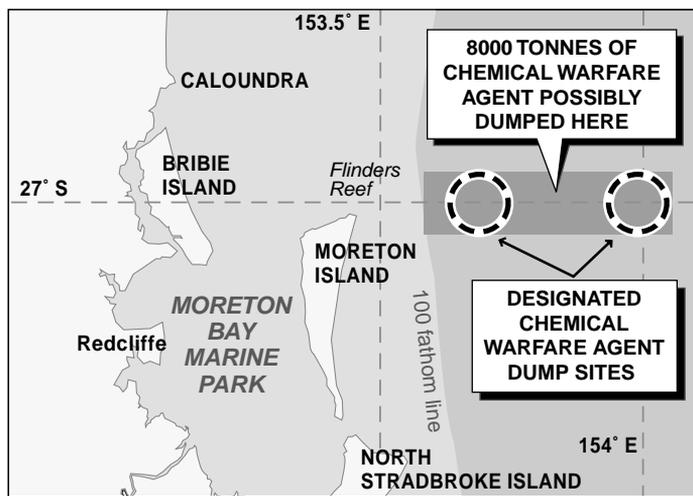
But Mr Plunkett said yesterday that he was unable to discuss the issue.

Ms Manning said she had not spoken with Mr Plunkett for several years and said she was unsure what became of the study.

A spokesman for Environment Minister David Kemp said the CWAs were a Defence issue.

However, a Defence spokeswoman was unable to say why the safety study had been abandoned.

It is understood Mr Plunkett's only recent work has been a study of non-toxic



ocean dumping but he has pushed for the CWA issue to be re-visited.

Documents obtained under Freedom of Information indicate Mr Plunkett was forced to re-write his original report.

He had sought to raise the potential risks and highlight that the dump off Cape Moreton was closer to the coast than government records indicated.

The documents also show the EPA, while editing Mr Plunkett's work, refused to publish his report.

It was eventually posted on the website of the navy's hydrographic office.

Although mustard gas would be rendered inactive if mixed with water, Mr Plunkett found the barrels would be a threat if they broke open after being hauled aboard fishing or mining vessels.

Former EPA executive director Barry Carbon said yesterday that he approved the

release of Mr Plunkett's report. He said he believed people should know the whereabouts of the dumps and the associated risks should any barrels resurface.

But Mr Carbon, who now heads the New Zealand Environment Ministry, said he did not know why publication of the report was delayed.

He said he was unaware of the proposed follow-up study.

Military archive records show the US army initially ignored its own expert advice to sink the CWAs off Cape Moreton at 500 fathoms.

They may have started dumping the barrels at only 100 fathoms.

A US soldier was killed and two others were injured when a gas shell being prepared for dumping exploded at a Darra depot in 1945.

There have also been cases of fishermen suffering serious burns after accidental exposure to CWAs.