



Pollution pumped out of road tunnel instead of stack

By Alexandra Smith

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Carbon monoxide has been regularly pumped out at ground level from Sydney's M5 East tunnel instead of its exhaust stack, internal Roads and Traffic Authority documents reveal.

The documents, tabled in NSW Parliament after a motion by Greens MP Sylvia Hale, revealed several problems with the tunnel, including suggestions that it was not designed to cope with congested traffic.

Under the tunnel's approval conditions, vehicle emissions can only be emitted from the tunnel's entrances and exits in extreme circumstances, including emergencies, major maintenance of the tunnel, and car accidents.

But Baulderstone Hornibrook, the operator of the tunnel, said it only allowed carbon monoxide to flow out the entrances instead of being directed to the stack, at nearby Turella, because of a faulty air monitor.

The tabled documents include letters from the RTA to Baulderstone Hornibrook, identifying a "history of routine faults and repairs to monitors" resulting in "unnecessary emissions" from the entrances and exits.

"The RTA regards this matter most seriously and is currently examining whether [the company] have breached their relevant obligations under the project deed," an RTA letter, dated May 17, reads.

A spokesman for the company, Paul Levins, said the faulty monitor was fixed and the emissions, which happened over several months from late last year, had stopped.

"We believed carbon monoxide was approaching a high level, so as a protective measure a mixture of vehicle emissions and fresh air in the tunnel was emitted out of the tunnel portals," Mr Levins said. "The portal emissions totalled only 3 per cent of tunnel air over some 24-hour periods and would have had little impact on external air quality at the tunnel entrances and exits."

Mr Levins said the company regretted the emissions but was confident they had little impact on air quality.

With the cross city and Lane Cove tunnels under construction, the revelations have put the Roads Minister, Carl Scully, under increased pressure to stick to his promise of conducting a trial of an in-tunnel filtration system.

Mr Scully said he remained committed to the trial, but had ruled out trialling the system for the full length of a tunnel. He had called for international expressions of interest for the project. "It would be just too cost prohibitive to do a whole tunnel," Mr Scully said.

A spokesman for Residents Against Polluting Stacks, Mark Curran, said the emissions from the M5 East were putting the health of residents living near the entrances and exits at risk.

"The concern that we have about the portal emissions is that because there is no dispersal at all for people who live near the portals, it is like concentrating two kilometres of roadway outside your house," he said.

Mr Curran said Bexley North residents living near one of the tunnel's exits reported at a Department of Health meeting in November suffering health problems, including ear, nose and throat irritations. "We didn't have an explanation but now we know they were being exposed to high levels of pollution from the portal emissions."

