

3 March 2022

Update on EPA investigation into mangrove dieback

The EPA's investigation into whether any offences were committed in relation to the dieback of mangroves at St Kilda is expected to be completed by mid-2022.

A brief of evidence will be submitted to the Crown Solicitor for review and the outcome of the investigation will ultimately be made public.

EPA Director of Science and Systems Keith Baldry said typical EPA investigations could take up to 12 months or more.

"It is not unusual for a complex EPA investigation to take 12 months or longer to compile evidence for the Crown Solicitor," he said.

The EPA is investigating whether the operator's actions at the Dry Creek saltfield site constituted an offence under the *Environment Protection Act 1993* in relation to the mangrove dieback.

"This has been a complex investigation as the Dry Creek site and coastal environment is a complex ecosystem," Mr Baldry said.

"While harm to the mangroves is obvious, assessing the causes and evidence for impact on vegetation is a long process.

"It needs monitoring over the year with seasonal changes in vegetation, groundwater and surface water. EPA scientists have continued to collect data and provide expert analysis.

"High-level specialist expert advice is required to understand vegetation such as mangroves, and interstate expertise has been brought in."

The EPA's multi-season scientific work was completed to enable an external mangrove specialist to provide an expert independent assessment. They requested further data, which was provided in February. It is now being analysed as part of the specialist's report to the EPA, which will form part of the brief for the Crown Solicitor.

It is important for the legal process that the investigation is conducted rigorously and to the highest standard.

Reports from EPA scientists and specialist experts are being compiled now ahead of completing the investigation report.

This formal investigation is separate to the work that began in September 2020, when the Department for Energy and Mining requested support from the EPA to investigate the cause of the dieback of what is now known to be approximately 10 ha of mangroves and 35 ha of saltmarsh adjacent to the Dry Creek saltfield.

Scientific monitoring and assessment have involved analysis of vegetation, groundwater, salinity and chemistry, and has been undertaken continuously since September 2020.

The purpose has been to understand the complex site, manage the risk of further harm to vegetation, and determine what interventions might be necessary to protect the environment.

The outcomes of that scientific work was published on the Department for Energy and Mining website.