



NEW ZEALAND (/NEWS/NATIONAL) / ENVIRONMENT (/TAGS/ENVIRONMENT)

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'We shouldn't have to live like this': Mataura waste scare

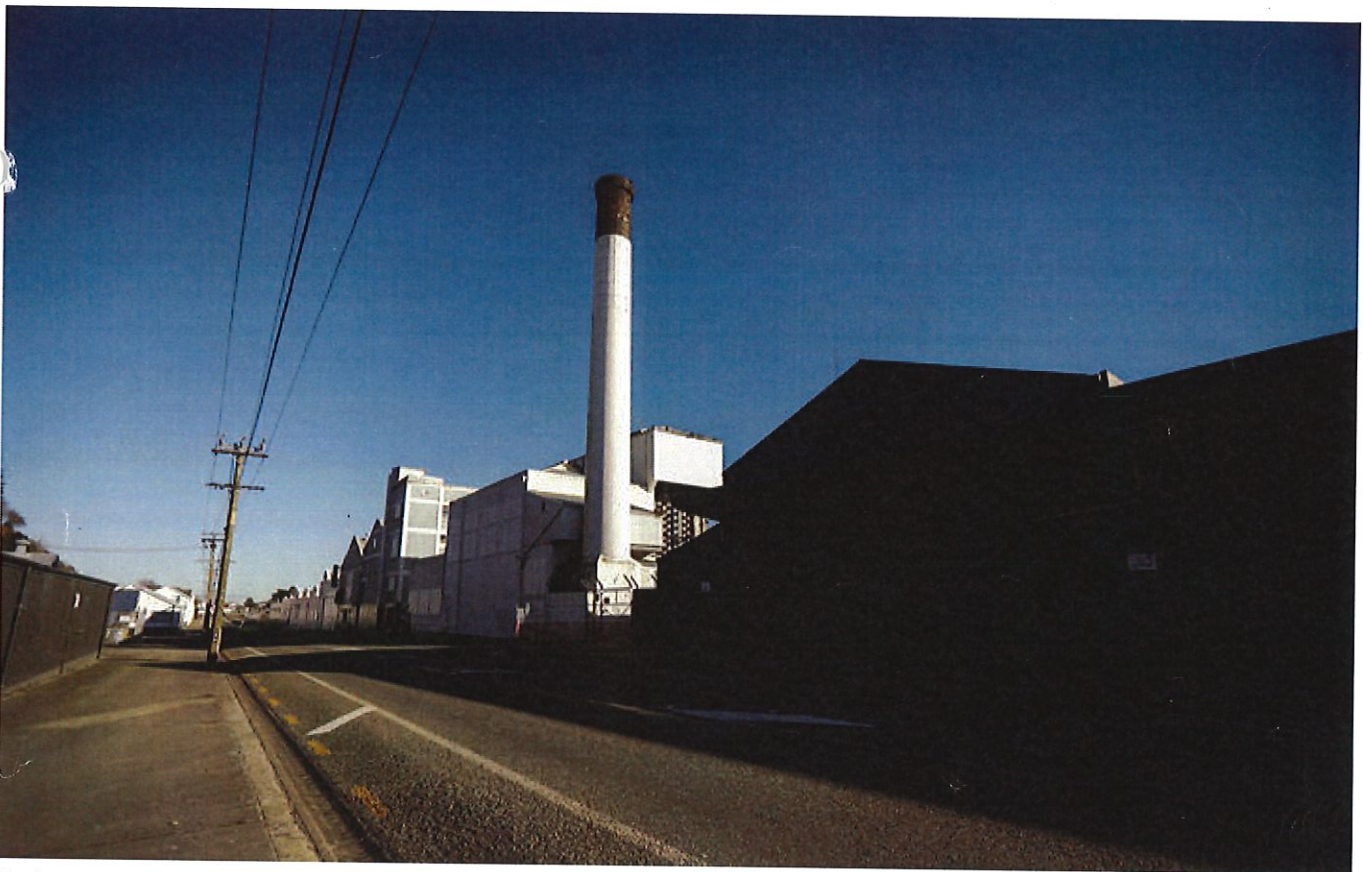
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subject='We%20shouldn't%20have%20to%20live%20like%20this':%20Mataura%20resident%20on%20third%20toxic%20waste%20scare)

Residents of the Southland town of Mataura have their bags packed ready to evacuate in case potentially lethal ammonia gas is released from toxic waste stored there.



The former paper mill in Mataura, Southland. Photo: RNZ / Rebekah Parsons-King

A nearby fire on Monday (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/424862/fire-at-disused-mataura-paper-mill-storing-potentially-toxic-waste-extinguished>) was the third incident in just six months that had threatened the ouvea premix that was dumped there six years ago. The dross is a by-product of aluminium production at Tiwai Point.

Meanwhile the Minister for the Environment is now joining legal action to determine whether the producer of the waste, Rio Tinto, is responsible for it.

After being given only five minutes to leave her home in February, amid fears the Mataura River had flooded the old paper mill (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/408902/toxic-ammonia-gas-likely-to-be-released-into-floodwaters-authorities>) where the dross was stored, this time Karen Turipa wanted to be prepared, and started packing her bags.

"A lot of people that I know have got their bags already packed ready to go. That's no way to live and some of these people are elderly, some of them are young. You know, you are watching Facebook and our road was getting blocked off, and you're thinking 'oh my gosh, what are we going to do?' "

8500 tonnes of the highly volatile waste was stored in close proximity to the town's 1600 residents.

pa lives 500 metres from it, and her son and his family live even closer.

"My daughter-in-law was trying to get back to the house, because they live just not far away and they couldn't get back through. We shouldn't have to live like this. It's just not fair."

While yesterday's fire in a hydroelectric plant 30 meters away from the dross was quickly contained, water posed the main threat, with the waste giving off deadly ammonia gas if it came in to contact with it.



Ouvea premix - or dross - is stored in loose bags around Southland. Photo: Sort out the Dross facebook page

There was another close call in July when frozen water pipes burst and flooded the area where the waste was stored.

Another resident, Robina Johnston, said there had been a lot of buck passing since the company contracted by Rio Tinto to deal with the dross, folded in 2016.

"This is three massive incidents in six months and the risk to the Maitara River, the risk to people's health. How much can a township take?"

Sort Out the Dross Action Group spokesperson, Cherie Chapman, said a deal the Gore District Council reached with the smelter and other parties in July last year had only resulted in one truckload of the waste being taken back to Tiwai Point each week, and at this rate it would take six years to finish the job.

"I'm bewildered about why they don't rescind that agreement that they had to slowly truck it out and make it a fast track process. It took three months to get all that lot in and they have eight and a half thousand tonnes to go. They could get that gone in two to three months."

Cherie Chapman said it was now beholden on the Environment Minister to step in and find a place to store the waste that was not next to a densely populated town.

"It's a hellish situation for people in Maitara to be living in you know, what if we have lightning and we have another flood, what the heck. So I think you know my heart goes out to those people in Maitara, they shouldn't have to be putting up with this."

Rio Tinto directed questions about the dross to the Gore District Council which it said had a contract for its removal.

Gore District mayor Tracy Hicks said it was moving as fast as it could.

"I am very aware of the level of anxiety that exists in Maitaura because there's that worry of, you know; What if? What might happen?

"And the community I don't believe have a responsibility to deal with this, but it's been left to the community to to pick up the pieces. We've picked up that mantle and led the charge."

In a statement, Minister for the Environment David Parker confirmed he had joined legal action by the Environmental Defence Society to clarify if Rio Tinto was responsible for the dross.

He said he understood the impatience of the locals and wanted to see the removal of the dross was sped up.