



Aussie scientists study dust

By Greg Roberts and AFP, AAP September 25, 2009, 11:27 pm



Photos: Wednesday's eerie storm

A team of Australian scientists are analysing the dust that has engulfed eastern Australia this week to see whether it is dangerous.

The dust storm is believed to have originated around Woomera in outback South Australia near the massive Olympic Dam uranium mine, prompting fears it was radioactive and dangerous.

Climatologist Professor Nigel Tapper, from Melbourne's Monash University, played down the risks to humans but said the dust might threaten important eco-systems such as the Great Barrier Reef.

"Certainly the dust storm could have potentially come from those outback areas, we believe it has mainly come from dry lake and creek beds and elsewhere in the Lake Eyre basin," he told AAP.

"That (radioactive) stuff has been spread around over a long time so I would not have thought there would be much of an issue around that.

"The main concern is over fine dust that goes right into the lungs triggering asthma and other respiratory problems."

The scientists were analysing dust that had been blown 2,150km to New Zealand and "fingerprinting" it, and its minerals, to find out where it came from and if it was a threat to the Coral Sea and agriculture.

Although it is not unusual for smoke particles to cross the Tasman, meteorologists said the arrival of Australian dust was a rare occurrence.

Dust blown from Africa is believed to have similarly damaged coral reefs in the Caribbean, Prof Tapper said.

"Our preliminary tests show materials are getting there and we have identified where it has come from but the biologists will look at the microbes and bacteria there and if it is causing impacts," he said.

"The coral reef is already affected by El Nino (warmer ocean), if it quickly becomes cool or hot and all sorts of such as run-off and different star fish."

Academy Award nominated documentary maker David Bradbury, who has made films about nuclear power, warned about the risks from radioactive dust near the Olympic mine on Friday.

Australian scientist Peter Cosier has also claimed poor land management had made Australia less resistant to dust storms, with another event predicted to hit Sydney this weekend and the drought being blamed for the dust.

The dust storm has been recorded as breaking air particle concentration levels and reaching 15,400 micrograms per cubic metre of air. Normal days register up to 20 micrograms and bushfires generate 500 micrograms.

Meteorologist Philip Duncan of the WeatherWatch website said orange dust falls had been reported in the North Island districts of Auckland, Northland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty and Taranaki.

It was clearly visible where it landed, particularly on car windows.

"It arrived yesterday afternoon but was caught up in the rain and cloud associated with the front. Now that the skies are clearing it's quite evident," Mr Duncan said on Friday.

A Taranaki resident told the website the dust was so thick at the school where he worked it would not wash away in heavy showers.