

Testers 'fabricating air pollution reports'

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A former employee of an Australian air testing company alleges data is being fabricated and fraudulently provided to regulatory bodies and is going unchecked by the government.

The former employee - who has now left the industry - alleges that shortcuts were habitually taken when testing for air pollution from smoke stacks during his three-year tenure with the company.

"While I was there, there wasn't any formal training. You were thrown in the deep end and the equipment was a piecemeal piece of equipment to do what was required, but not to do anything properly.

"I even saw on numerous times my superiors turning up on site with me to do the work and then saying that they couldn't be bothered doing the sampling.

"I've also seen them, for dioxins and furans, which were very expensive tests that had to be done, instead of doing the six-hour sample I've seen them pretend to have taken samples onto filter papers."



PHOTO: [A call for improved regulation of the air testing industry puts air pollution in question.](#)

(Senor Codo: flickr.com)

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The scientist says he and colleagues were pressured to cut corners.

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"Being hurried off site, not being given enough time. If it would take a whole week to get a job completed, you would get it completed in two days

MAP: [Brisbane 4000](#)

because you're required elsewhere. So you were sent off somewhere else and the figures were made up so that you could get two large jobs done in a week instead of just the one."

The man says he has obtained copies of reports that support his claims since leaving the company.

And he says he believes the fraudulent behaviour is going undetected and could be widespread within the industry.

He alleges the National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) and the Department of Environment and Resource Management are not sufficiently regulating compliance to standards.

"The Environmental Protection Agency is requesting that industry provide them with reports by NATA-accredited bodies that detail the levels of air emissions that they have," he said.

"But when these reports are submitted they are taken at face value and they're not being properly scrutinised by either NATA or the EPA. So there is nothing to show that these are being done properly, and I have evidence to show that they haven't been done properly if they were to be checked."

He says the effects of non-compliance could be detrimental for the public.

"If we don't have accurate figures on what is being emitted into the air, in Gladstone for example, we have no way of knowing if levels are being exceeded past safe community levels - and the air could have high levels of lead, high levels of dioxins, of carcinogens, or poisons into the atmosphere which could then cause sickness."

The scientist also says that due to non-compliance going unchecked, councils make uninformed decisions about industry expansions.

And he says similar discrepancies in air testing could be occurring in the coal seam gas industry.

"If they got the incorrect information about the amount of pollutants that are being put into the atmosphere, they are unable to accurately determine whether to go ahead with expansions, because they don't have a correct baseline to know what the air pollution levels are at any one time."

He says during his time at the company he saw large companies go from struggling to pass compliance tests, to easily passing environmental standards.

"NATA needs to start doing their job properly," he said.

"Unfortunately they're not an independent body because they are paid for by the stack testing companies themselves ... so there is no independence there.

"But ideally we should look more towards the American model, where the environmental protection agency have their own sampling officers who are fully experienced in stack testing and actually will perform surprise visits to stack testing companies when they're on site, are able to audit reports, and have a requirement that raw data is included in the stack testing reports so that anyone can have a look and ensure that things are being done to the standard.

"At the moment there are no requirements that you include your raw data in Australia. And every testing company should have that data. It should be no problem for them to include it in any report that they submit, to show that things were done to the standard."

ETS corruption claim

He says the lack of regulation could impact on the usefulness and effectiveness of an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) in the future.

"Well the ETS would be corrupt is what I can see. Any company that is obligated by an ETS system to report their carbon emissions are obviously going to shop around to find the company that can provide them with a report with the lowest emissions."

NATA quality manager Tony Vandenberg says calibration, testing, and inspection activities are conducted under current regulations.

"We're quite confident that the surveillance regime in place is adequate for these types of facilities, and I point out that for the sorts of work these people are doing it's a significant effort to produce false data to the extent that it would be able to get through the assessment program without being identified as being suspect."

But he says it is possible data could be made up and not be picked up by NATA.

"That's possible ? our reassessment programs are what we call a sampling exercise. We don't go through and review every report, we look at a sample of the work done by that facility.

"We witness how the facility undertakes that work and we look at the processes and systems they have in place for recording data and for ensuring traceability of data through the sampling process onto the final reports."

Mr Vandenberg says NATA performs scheduled surveillance.

"We attend every 18 months and yes, that does include witnessing of the sampling activities. So for the example of stack sampling, we would actually go and witness a stack test, which is a fairly involved process of set-up, establishing what the appropriate set-up is for the particular stack scenario, and looking at how that data is captured with whatever the appropriate standard is they're applying."

"But for a facility that we have established is complying with the requirement, unless we have reason to believe otherwise we would not attend other than within our programmed surveillance schedule."

The employee alleges that over an eight-month period he provided detailed reports to NATA that indicated fraudulent behaviour by an accredited body but that nothing was done.

But Mr Vandenberg says the NATA complaints system is adequate.

"We have processes in place in deal with complaints, particularly where it's an allegation of non-compliance.

"At that level the issue would have been acknowledged then and dealt with. The other side of that is that when we investigate these sorts of complaints we need sufficient information or evidence to be able to make a judgement on what's actually going on there. And I can assure you that that information would be thoroughly investigated."

'No conflict of interest'

He says that the fact that the EPA requests that industry provides them with reports by NATA-accredited bodies does not consequently cause a conflict of interest or unfair tendering within the industry.

"NATA is not necessarily a commercial private company, it is certainly a self-funding, not-for-profit membership organisation run by its members and other stakeholders.

"It doesn't receive government funding. So it is independent, but it is a membership organisation and structured as such. One of the important things about NATA is that it is identified by the federal government as the peak body for the provision of accreditation in this country. And a part of that memorandum of understanding which backs up that authority is that we need to operate in a manner which, amongst other things, would ensure the sort of independence that we need in this case.

"So I would argue that NATA accreditation is provided in an independent and fair and equitable manner, I guess I would rebuke that argument that NATA accreditation somehow drives these problems."

However, Mr Vandenberg says he does see how an unfair tendering system could arise.

"Yes, certainly I can see the argument in that case, but I guess what I'm saying is that whilst we say it could happen, we are also saying at the same time [that] we are confident in our assessment processes."

Mr Vandenberg says he is confident NATA is an accountable authority, but will not comment on whether improved regulation is required in Australia.

He says NATA has struck off accredited bodies for non-compliance.

"Yes, there have been cases where non-compliance with NATA accreditation requirements for a range of reasons has lead to a change in status from operative to otherwise."

Mr Vandenberg says the allegations made are of concern.

"They cause me concern in so far as that we are starting to talk about information, which, if it can be verified with the facility concerned, yes it would raise concerns with compliance with

accreditation."

Topics: air-pollution, business-economics-and-finance, emissions-trading, regional-development, community-and-society, urban-development-and-planning, environment, pollution, government-and-politics, federal-government, local-government, health, environmental-health, science-and-technology, earth-sciences, brisbane-4000, cairns-4870, gladstone-4680, mackay-4740, maroochydore-4558, mount-isa-4825, rockhampton-4700

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