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SLUDGE AND WASTE DUMPING

Green Scorpions probe Richards Bay minerals company

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Picture: SUPPLIED

The Department of Environmental Affairs's Green Scorpions inspectorate is investigating sludge and waste disposal by heavy minerals company Richards Bay Minerals (RBM) after claims that the firm was dumping "toxic waste" near rural residential areas.

The department says its officials inspected sections of the mining lease area near Richards Bay in May and the company has been asked to provide reports for official review and analysis of sludge toxicity.

RBM, a subsidiary of the Rio Tinto group, has confirmed the inspection and says it will continue to co-operate with the Green Scorpions.

The inspection follows complaints by environmental watchdog group groundWork and the KwaZulu Regional Christian Council.

According to groundWork, it lodged a complaint on behalf of the KwaMbonambi community and other residents who voiced concern that waste dumping could be linked to "increased rates of cancer and destruction to their community and environment". These concerns were raised during research and community monitoring done by the KwaZulu Regional Christian Council.

Mining slimes and other material have been dumped in the KwaMbonambi, Sokhulu and Enhlanzini areas since the 1970s as by-products from dune mining, says groundWork waste campaigner Musa Chamane.

One slimes dam is near the beach and feared to be affecting ground water in an area south of Lake Nhlabane.

Department of Environmental Affairs spokesman Albi Modise says the inspection will determine whether there is any failure to comply with environmental laws, regulations and standards.

"The facility was contacted in order to make arrangements for the site inspection. Upon arrival at RBM offices, officials were informed that the clarifier sludge dams are located within the active mining area and, in line with the relevant policies and requirements, the officials were transported to the clarifier sludge dams by a representative from RBM," Modise says.

1970S

The decade in which a campaigner says dumping of mining slimes began in Kwa-Mbonambi, Sokhulu and Enhlanzini

"The site inspection was not compromised as the officials were able to take photographs independently and question the RBM representatives regarding their observations.

"Samples were not taken from the clarifier sludge dams for analysis at this stage. Water quality analysis reports and classification of the clarifier sludge are amongst the reports requested from the facility in order to determine the toxicity of the sludge. These reports, as well as other documentation and findings, will first be reviewed and, if necessary, samples will be taken as part of further investigations."

Modise says other areas visited are the Sokhulu Charcoal site (a community project), the historical reclamation site, the dredger mining pond-A site and the stockpile-H disposal site.

Stockpile-H is registered with the national nuclear regulator because the wastes contain low levels of naturally occurring radioactive material, including uranium, thorium, radium and polonium.

"Should there be grounds for a reasonable suspicion of an offence under National Environmental Management Act or specific environmental management acts — for example, the Integrated Coastal Management Act — further investigations will be pursued," Modise says.

"However, should the reasonable suspicion of any alleged offences fall within the ambit of the Minerals and Petroleum Resources Development Act, the matter will be referred to Department of Mineral Resources for its attention and investigation."

RBM MD Billy Mawasha says the safety and wellbeing "of our employees and host communities is our single most important priority and we comply with strict environmental regulations as determined by Department of Environmental Affairs, Department of Mineral Resources and Department of Water and Sanitation.

"Following a recent site visit by the Green Scorpions we provided them with various documents in line with their requests and will continue to co-operate with any further requests they may have. We will also discuss any community concerns in a transparent manner through our usual channels," says Mawasha.

<https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/companies/mining/2018-06-07-green-scorpions-probe-richards-bay-minerals-company/>