

Role of empty wagons highlighted



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RAIL industry insiders say more coal is lost from supposedly "empty" wagons than full ones and the impact of coal dust on track and rolling stock maintenance is a major cost.

The "empty wagon" problem was confirmed by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union's Newcastle organiser, Steve Wright, who said it was well known to the industry.

The Coal Terminal Action Group, which reignited the dust debate this week with allegations an official report had been changed in a cover-up, said the empty wagon claims needed to be investigated.

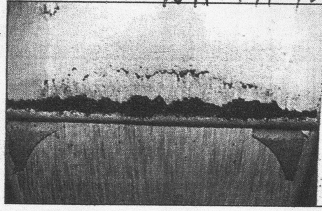
But group member James Whelan said the focus should stay on invisible, respirable, particles of coal rather than "the coal you can see on the side of the tracks".

"There is almost certainly a relationship, but health experts are not so concerned about coal that cannot be deeply inhaled," Dr Whelan said.

"The smaller the particles, the greater the health impact. And even PM10 is not visible, let alone PM2.5 or PM1."

Asked about the "empty wagon" scenario, the Environment Protection Authority said the study by the Australian Rail Track Corporation was "required by the EPA in response to community concerns that loaded coal wagons should be covered".

"If you are correct in your hypothesis that empty trains are the problem, then it



NOT CLEAN:
This
"empty"
wagon
headed for
the Hunter
Valley from
Newcastle
still contains
coal.

would not be effective to cover loaded coal trains - which is what the debate has been about so far," an EPA spokeswoman said.

She said both versions of the ARTC study suggested there was "no appreciable difference between the dust levels measured from the movement of loaded coal trains and other types of freight trains".

But Dr Whelan said that was just one of 18 conclusions.

"The important thing is that both versions of the report accept that coal trains, loaded and unloaded, have statistically significant elevations of particulate matter concentrations when compared with no trains."

He said the action group would continue to analyse the report differences and take up ARTC's offer of "raw data".

Though the rail union has not been active in the debate so far, dust came from coal trains in both directions, Mr Wright said.

"Especially on long trips down from Ulan or Gunnedah, coal that's been through a washery can start to dry out - especially on hot days," he said.

"The new bat-wing wagons

are more aerodynamic and it's not such a problem. But with the older wagons you'd see the dust coming off the top.

"With the empties, they are never really empty.

"Every time the cars go over a set of points or anything that jars the wagons, it tends to shake the coal out the bottom.

"Even though the doors at the bottom are shut, the dust still makes its way through the cracks onto the tracks and the ballast.

"And then it gets swirled up by the next train and the one after that, and so on."

He said the tracks were cleaned using machinery that lifted a section of rail by about 30 centimetres while mechanical "fingers" loosened the ballast rocks from both sides.

Coal dust was vacuumed out and new ballast stones added if needed.

Rail sources directed the Newcastle Herald to a large pile of coal "fines" sitting beside the rail tracks near Warabrook station, which they said had been cleaned from the tracks in a recent maintenance "possession".

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APPENDIX 1

IN THE OPEN: The large pile of coal "fines" sitting beside rail tracks near Warabrook station ... sources said they had been cleaned from the tracks recently.



Dust debate deepens

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APPENDIX 2