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Department of Biodiversity,  
Conservation and Attractions

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## Rural activity contamination

Most rural activities use chemicals as a matter of routine, particularly when activities involve fruit, vegetable, grain or meat production. Rural and regional areas are also more exposed to elements of environmental degradation such as salinity on land and algal blooms in dams and rivers.

Contamination, as defined by the *Contaminated Sites Act 2003 (Act)*, refers to having a substance present on land, water or site at levels above background concentrations and at high enough concentrations such that it presents, or has the potential to present, a risk to human health, the environment or any environmental value. Under the Act it is a requirement for certain people to report sites they know or suspect are contaminated to the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). This fact sheet aims to provide guidance on which sorts of activities in a rural setting should be reported, and those that are not required to be reported.

The *Contaminated Sites Regulations 2006* include a number of situations where the definition of 'contaminated' does not apply. These include:

- Surface water eutrophication (algal blooms caused from excess nutrients).
- Land affected by salinity.
- Fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides that have been applied in accordance with the laws of the day, or manufacturer recommendations. This only applies if the land use has not changed since application.

The Act doesn't apply if the situations outlined above are the only potentially contaminating activities occurring on a property and the property is not being changed to a more sensitive land use.

There are, however, potential causes of contamination that are commonly associated with rural activities that may be required to be reported to DEC.

These may include:

- Current or historical arsenic-based sheep or cattle dips - especially if they were unlined or sludge/residue was disposed of on-site.
- Uncontrolled landfills and rubbish dumps - particularly sites where unused chemicals were disposed of on-site and leachate from landfills may enter surface water or groundwater.
- Areas of land where fertilisers, pesticides or herbicides were not applied in accordance with manufacturer recommendations and therefore elevated concentrations may be present in soil.
- Large spillages of hazardous chemicals or fuels which have impacted soil and may impact groundwater and surface water.
- Storage of disused chemicals, particularly where these have the potential to leak into the soil, surface water or groundwater.

Where a potentially contaminating activity has been identified, an environmental consultant may need to be engaged to conduct a contamination assessment which will determine if the soil and/or groundwater has been impacted and, if so, whether there is a risk to human health or the environment.

Details on how to hire an environmental consultant to conduct these investigations can be found in Fact Sheet 5, *How to hire a contaminated site consultant or an Accredited Auditor*.

Proposals to develop agricultural properties into a more sensitive land use (e.g. a market garden being developed to a residential estate) may also be required to undergo a contamination assessment.

For more details on how to report a known or suspected contaminated site please refer to Fact Sheet 4, *How do I report a site?* and the DEC Guideline, *Reporting of known or suspected contaminated sites*.



### **Need more information?**

DEC has published a series of fact sheets and administrative and technical guidelines to assist with the assessment, management and remediation of contaminated sites in Western Australia; these are available by going to [www.dec.wa.gov.au/contaminatedsites](http://www.dec.wa.gov.au/contaminatedsites).

Further information is available by mail from the address below or by calling the Contaminated Sites Section on 1300 762 982.

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