https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-02-13/salmon-disease-outbreak-antibiotics-river-derwent/106330724

Water utility 'confident' Hobart drinking water is antibiotic-free after salmon disease outbreak

By Clancy Balen | Fishing and Aquaculture Industry

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TasWater says its water treatment process removes any risk of antibiotics entering the treated water supply. *(ABC News: Lucas Hill)*

In short:

TasWater says it is confident its water treatment process removes the risk of antibiotics entering Greater Hobart's public water supply, and the Director of Public Health has determined there is no health risk.

Salmon company Huon Aquaculture used an antibiotic called oxytetracycline to deal with a disease outbreak at a hatchery on the River Derwent, but the public was not initially informed.

What's next?

The Environment Protection Authority says it will implement new regulatory requirements that will require it to be notified of antibiotic treatments in freshwater environments.

Tasmania's water provider says there is no risk of antibiotics entering Hobart's water supply, following Huon Aquaculture's use of oxytetracycline in a hatchery connected to the River Derwent.

The salmon giant administered the medication as a "last line of defence" after an increase in deaths at its Meadowbank hatchery located 40 kilometres upstream from TasWater's Bryn Estyn water treatment plant.

The treatment plant provides water to much of the Greater Hobart area.

A TasWater spokesperson said the utility was confident its water treatment process, combined with the distance between the treatment and hatchery, "removes any risk of antibiotics entering our treated water supply".

"TasWater undertakes extensive testing of its water supply," the spokesperson said.

> **"We don't specifically test for antibiotics, as we see there is minimal risk of antibiotics making it into our drinking water supply."**

In a statement, Tasmania's Director of Public Health, Mark Veitch, said based on available information, he determined "there was no risk to human health" from the limited use of the antibiotic.

Dr Veitch said the treated feed was administered to fish contained in tanks rather than in open water, sediment management at the hatchery would minimise the release of antibiotic, and the levels of antibiotic would be diluted in the waterway.

A Huon Aquaculture spokesperson confirmed the medication was administered over two periods at the Meadowbank hatchery, between January 21 and February 9.

TasWater's Bryn Estyn water treatment plant provides drinking water to most of the Greater Hobart area. *(Supplied: Prime Perspectives)*

The spokesperson said the company advised the Tasmanian Environment Protection Authority (EPA) on January 20.

"The notification period is in line with government reporting expectations in the marine environment, when veterinary advice determines urgent treatment is necessary," they said.

The use of antibiotics was only made public following a report by the Tasmanian Inquirer.

There is no current regulatory requirement to make the use of antibiotics in freshwater hatcheries public.

Huon Aquaculture has confirmed it recently used oxytetracycline to treat diseased salmon at its Meadowbank hatchery. *(ABC News: Simon Farrell)*

EPA flags reporting changes

An EPA spokesperson said the use of antibiotics at the Meadowbank hatchery had "enabled the EPA to consider and implement new regulatory requirements".

These include requiring the EPA to be notified of antibiotic treatments, and monitoring for antibiotic residues to be undertaken, in freshwater environments.

The EPA spokesperson said the new regulations would be introduced by the end of March, and results would be published on its website.

TasWater says it undertakes extensive testing of its water supply. *(ABC News: Tony King)*

The changes have failed to allay concerns from Tasmanian Independent upper house member Meg Webb, who was critical of the initial secrecy surrounding the use of antibiotics.

"While some information gaps are finally being filled in, these recent statements fail to address why the public were kept in the dark in the first place," Ms Webb said.

"Nor do they address a range of concerns associated with the antibiotic oxytetracycline, such as potential for antimicrobial resistance."

Tasmanian Greens leader Rosalie Woodruff on Wednesday said the EPA's new reporting commitments fell short.

"The EPA should be notifying the public in real time, when antibiotics are being used in the drinking water supply and in the marine environment," Dr Woodruff said.

> **"They've got the capacity to do that; that's the minimum that's required."**

Rosalie Woodruff says the EPA's reporting commitments fall short. *(ABC News: Ebony ten Broeke)*

Alternative to flow-through system

Freshwater hatcheries are used by salmon companies to raise juvenile fish called smolt, before they are transferred to marine pens.

Huon Aquaculture's Meadowbank facility is a flow-through fish farm, meaning the water flows through the pens before being discharged back into the water source.

Independent scientist and former Derwent Estuary Program chief executive Christine Coughanowr said while treatment methods were used at flow-through hatcheries to reduce pollutants, they would not eliminate all the environmental risks.

The EPA says the use of antibiotics at the Meadowbank hatchery enabled it to consider and implement new regulatory requirements. *(Facebook: Huon Aquaculture)*

"Whatever else is used in the facility, whether it be antibiotics or disinfectants, hormones, salt water sometimes — that's all picked up in the water that flows through," Ms Coughanowr said.

> **"Operationally, it's a bad idea to have to use antibiotics in a flow-through fish farm where it's discharged to a waterway upstream of public drinking water."**

An alternative to the flow-through system is a "recirculation" system, which Ms Coughanowr said used less water.

"It provides for a lot more control over water quality within the fish farm and much lower emissions, and far lower water use," she said.

In its Salmon Industry Plan 2023, the Tasmanian government flagged the development of a framework to transition flow-through hatcheries to recirculating systems as a "priority item".

A Department of Natural Resources and Environment spokesperson said consultation on draft standards for the plan would occur later this year, and would involve consideration of the latest technical and science-based expertise and data.

The spokesperson said the majority of industry hatchery production already used recirculating systems.

Antibiotics use continues at marine pens

Oxytetracycline has been used in Tasmanian and Australian marine environments previously, but it isn't the only antibiotic used in the aquaculture sector.

Last November, the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) confirmed the emergency approval for another type of antibiotic, florfenicol, in salmon pens along the Tasmania's south-east coast.

The emergency application was made by the salmon industry following a mass mortality event caused by an endemic bacterial disease, which killed up to 15,000 tonnes of salmon between January and April last year.

That same month, it was revealed 700 kilograms of florfenicol was used in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel over a 13-day period.

The permit to administer the antibiotic will expire on August 31.

APVMA chief executive Scott Hansen told a Senate hearing on Tuesday that more information would need to be supplied by the salmon industry to extend the permit.

"We've been told their long-term ambition is registration of the product, and that they'd be collecting data as part of these permits to be able to support that application," Mr Hansen said.

> **"They would need, for a broader ongoing registration, a lot more information about any microbial resistance."**

The World Health Organisation has described "antimicrobial resistance" — caused by antibiotic "misuse and overuse" — as "one of the top global public health and development threats".

Mr Hansen said the industry could apply for another short-term permit to administer the antibiotic.

"That'd be judged on the merits of the information they provide," he said.

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