

VARS News Update



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The Bellarine Peninsula Independent



Ship hasn't come in: Dive industry figures Jason Salter, John Lawler and Lloyd Borrett fear State Government has missed the boat on HMAS Canberra. Picture: Mark Farrugia

Dive hopes sink

BY KAREN HART

DELAYS have scuttled hopes for an artificial reef to offset the economic damage of bay dredging on the region's dive industry, according to a diving lobby group.

Victorian Artificial Reef Society last month demanded transfer of HMAS Canberra from Western Australia by June

so it could be in placed off Point Lonsdale this summer.

But society president John Lawler this week said State Government was still in protracted negotiations on the ship with maritime defence service provider Tenix.

Mr Lawler said the diving industry was worried the ship would now not sink off Point Lonsdale until early next year after the channel dredging had started.

The ship could help the industry compensate for loss of business due to dredging turbidity driving divers away from existing bay dive sites, he said.

"A decision by Tenix was due to come on May 4 but we received a call this week telling us that it won't be made until the end of May," Mr Lawler said.

"The implications of this are far reaching. Once the state and federal govern-

ments sign off on the deal it will be some time before the paperwork is completed and I can't see the vessel being prepared in five months, so we're looking at next year.

"We need to get the ship down before the dredging, as turbidity from dredging throughout the channel would render visibility non-existent.

"We need the new dive site to keep the industry alive."

Mr Lawler said the sunken ship would attract divers from around the world.

"HMAS Canberra would be Victoria's centrepiece as a world-class temperate-water diving destination," he said.

Mr Lawler wondered whether the state's tourism body was having trouble finding enough money to cover its share of the project.

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Channel dredge sinks dive hopes

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"If Tourism Victoria is having trouble with finances then it would behove them to up the funding. The State Government contributed \$500,000 for the project, which is a drop in the ocean," Mr Lawler said.

Federal Government has committed \$2.8 million to the project.

Port of Melbourne Corporation plans to dredge Port Phillip Bay, potentially early next year, to allow access for larger ships.

The Victorian dive industry employs around 520 people full-time and 3120 part-time. Around 68,000 dives were completed in 2005.

Mr Lawler said the artificial reef society was due to meet with Tourism Victoria next week to discuss HMAS Canberra.

Member for Bellarine Lisa Neville told the *Independent* last month that she expected the ship would sink off Point Lonsdale "this year".

UPDATE

Since this story was printed VARS has been in contact with Tourism Victoria, the Victorian Government's ex HMAS Canberra Project Manager.

VARS has been told that Tourism Victoria is still negotiating with contractors as to who will be awarded the contract to prepare and sink the ex HMAS Canberra.

It is hoped that a decision will be able to be announced before the end of May 2007.