Media Release

The Hon Daniel Andrews MP
Premier

Wednesday, 9 September 2020

LOOKING TO THE SEWERS FOR EARLY CORONAVIRUS WARNING

Victoria's wastewater can hold clues to the presence of coronavirus in communities where there are no known cases, and our sewage surveillance program is just one of the defences we'll be relying on, as we take our next steps towards COVID Normal.

Testing of sewage samples collected in Apollo Bay in recent days has shown viral fragments of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes coronavirus.

The virus was detected in wastewater on Friday 4 September from a sample collected from the influent (entry pipe) to the sewage treatment plant on Tuesday 1 September.

The positive result was also confirmed with an independent test of the same sample collected on 1 September. A further wastewater sample taken on Saturday 5 September was also positive for viral fragments.

The Department of Health and Human Services has stepped up testing in the area with the help of local health services.

People from Apollo Bay and nearby communities with even mild symptoms are urged to get tested, with more than 60 local people already answering the call to be tested since the weekend, with no positive results at present.

Victoria has joined other states and New Zealand in a collaborative research project to understand the occurrence of coronavirus viral fragments in wastewater systems. Coordinated by Water Research Australia, the ColoSSoS project (Collaboration on Sewage Surveillance of SARS-CoV-2) brings together health departments, water utilities, laboratories and researchers from Australia and New Zealand to share advances in this rapidly evolving field.

People who have had coronavirus may shed the virus or virus fragments on used tissues, off their hands and skin when washing, and in their stool.

The virus breaks down and viral fragments enter wastewater through bowls, sinks and drains, and travels through the sewerage network. Up to 300 samples a week can be taken and tested from across 25 sites across Victoria's metropolitan and regional sewerage network.

While viral fragments may indicate that people within a community have or have recently had coronavirus, it can take several weeks for people to shed the virus which is well beyond their infectious period. Sewage monitoring may become more valuable as an early detection tool as the number of new infections detected through routine testing reduces.

The Department will continue to review sewage test results as well as the epidemiology of coronavirus across Victoria to guide sewage testing locations and the frequency of sampling.

The ColoSSoS project has linkages with similar projects in the USA, Canada, Europe and South Africa, as well as via the Global Water Research Coalition.

Quotes attributable to Premier Daniel Andrews

"Knowledge is power when it comes to the fight against coronavirus – we'll continue to use all tools we have available to keep communities safe as we take our First Step to COVID Normal."

"Our wastewater testing is just another local partnership to track and trace the virus – and by combining positive results with a testing push we are ensuring communities are COVID safe."

Quote attributable to Minister for Health Jenny Mikakos

"Wastewater testing may be able to give us early warning that coronavirus is in a community and the head start we need for early detection and preventive action."

Quote attributable to Minister for Water Lisa Neville

"Sewage testing has great potential to provide communities with early warning about local cases of coronavirus - and our water corporations are proud to be joining health research partners and playing a role in the fight against this virus."