

# Health officials say quarry dust a nuisance but not a health risk

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Quarries face strict new enforcement over dust monitoring, despite research finding there is little effect on public health.

Quarry companies in Canterbury face strict enforcement of monitoring over dust levels, despite a study finding no serious risk to public health from airborne dust.

Environment Canterbury (ECan) set up a monitoring programme in Yaldhurst – one of Christchurch's quarrying hotspots - to test for toxic silica dust following concerns from residents about the health effects of dust and frustration their properties being left coated with grime.

After months of tests the research showed results were well below the international guidelines for respirable crystalline silica (RCS) dust, and that there are no risks to people's health.



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Canterbury's quarrying industry faces tough new enforcement over dust.

But authorities concede dust from quarrying is a nuisance and have promised tougher enforcement and to clamp down on quarry operators who flaunt rules.

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ECan chief operating officer Nadeine Dommissie described the move as a "huge step forward for quarry dust management in Christchurch", and said the discovery would provide "reassurance" for residents about long-term health concerns.



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ECan chief operating officer Nadeine Dommissie, right, said the move to introduce new monitoring standards is a "huge step forward" for dust management.

"It's clear that quarry dust need to be managed better and we agree that more needs to be done by the quarry operators themselves, by Environment Canterbury and by other agencies involved in assisting of managing quarry dust."

The findings will come as a mixture of relief and consternation for residents who have long campaigned over the impact of quarry dust on their lives, many of whom have evidence from their doctors linking issues such as nose bleeds and respiratory problems dust.

Some are so concerned about quarrying near their homes they said they would leave the area after Road Metals was granted permission to expand its operations last month.



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Yaldhurst resident Anna Youngman, who has long suffered from health problems she and her doctors attribute to quarry dust, says an expansion of a nearby Road Metals quarry could force her and her husband from their home.

The expansion was conditional on the results of the monitoring programme, and the findings will likely pave the way for it to go ahead.

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The monitoring – set up around various sites in Yaldhurst, including on residents' properties, and carried out by independent experts – detected RCS just twice in four months,

and on both occasions levels were below conservative international guidelines.

Nuisance dust was recorded on just nine of 120 monitored days. Of those, 13 exceedances spanned between one minute to less than one hour.



Road Metals has been granted permission to quarry 13 hectares, labelled as RM4. Bosses say the move is vital to help meet Christchurch's gravel needs.

Canterbury medical officer of health Dr Ramon Pink, who reviewed the results, said the overall results showed there was no serious public health risk to Yaldhurst residents from airborne dust.

"Nuisance dust levels will not cause long-term health effects, but we know it can cause irritation and symptoms of concern in some people."

Pink and ECan bosses visited residents in Yaldhurst on Friday to give them the results in person, and said he found them "really hospitable".



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Annell McDonagh, whose property is surrounded by quarries in Yaldhurst, says dust has affected her and her family's health.

"Their concerns are long term, they are sceptical of the monitoring and so we just listened to those. We are wanting to continue a dialogue with them in the long term to make sure that they are heard and we can respond to them."

Pink also said it was difficult to be absolutely certain residents' ill-health was caused by action at quarries.

Dommissie said that quarry dust management had not been good enough in the past and that more needs to be done by "all parties" as she unveiled tough new requirements for monitoring dust.

All consented quarries within 500m of homes – around 20 or 30 in Canterbury – will be required to install dust monitors on their boundaries by December 1, with the threat of legal action for those who fail to comply.

Quarry operators will have to make the data available to ECan and inform the regional council in the event of a breach.

Dommissie said companies flouting rules would face penalties ranging from orders to stop work to prosecution.

Wayne Scott, chief executive of quarrying health and safety body MinEx, said quarries in Canterbury were developing a voluntary code of practice to reassure residents.

"While many quarries have good dust management in place, all operators need to continue to lift their game because any dust that emerges from a quarry – as from any farming or earthmoving operation – is annoying to close neighbours," he said.

Aggregate and Quarry Association chairman Brian Roche welcomed the monitoring results, saying its members "work hard to meet dust limits".

**- Stuff**