Urgent action needed as smelter 'poisons kids'

SARAH MARTIN THE AUSTRALIAN JULY 16, 2012 12:00AM

CHILDREN are being poisoned at Nyrstar's Port Pirie lead smelter while the state government idly watches, the author of a report into the plant says.

Macquarie University's Mark Taylor, who reviewed lead emission data for the South Australian Environment Protection Authority in 2010, has lashed inaction on upgrading the metal smelter 200km north of Adelaide.

Dr Taylor has taken aim at politicians for misleading the community, saying the severity of the lead pollution is "an uncomfortable fact" that must be addressed.

"The evidence demonstrates that Port Pirie is unequivocally the most lead-contaminated urban environment in Australia," he said. "It is an uncomfortable fact, especially for the young families in the city and it saddens me, but they need to know the truth."

Dr Taylor said that he was not calling for the smelter to close, but said it needed to be refitted as a matter of urgency. "The evidence is clear: the elevated blood leads in Port Pirie children is caused by smelter emissions.

"The EPA understands the problem, the smelter also comprehends the problem, and the Health Department clearly knows it.

"What other evidence is required for more effective, immediate and appropriate action?"

Dr Taylor said a government report commissioned in 1983 had called for "urgent action" on the smelter, and yet lead poisoning was still rife in the community.

"Thirty years on the government is still watching while children are being poisoned.

"By not treating the primary source of the problem, they are condemning kids to be lead poisoned. It is outrageous."

He said there was overwhelming evidence to suggest that present-day lead emissions, not historic emissions, were the main cause of lead poisoning, despite repeated claims from politicians to the contrary.

"That is simply misleading and it is more of the same obfuscation that has been peddled in and about Port Pirie for decades."

His comments follow claims by independent MP for the area Geoff Brock, who said the city "was not polluted" last week, and that he would seek an urgent briefing from Dr Taylor to discuss lead pollution findings.

New licence conditions for the Port Pirie smelter are imminent, with South Australia's Environment Protection Authority saying it provided Nyrstar with the proposed revisions at the end of last month.

The stricter conditions will require an upgrade of up to $350 million, for which Nyrstar has said it is seeking state and federal government assistance.

The Australian revealed last week the company wants to transform the smelter into a metals recovery facility, but this would not occur before 2014-15.