

MEDIA Release

EASTERN AUSTRALIA BRACES FOR DUSTY SUMMER

The coating of red dust covering Brisbane and the Gold Coast last night could be just a taste of the hot, dusty summer to come, according to scientists from Griffith University's Dustwatch research program.

"It appears red dust from Western Queensland that has been in the air since last Thurs was flushed out of the air last night during thunderstorms," said Program Director Prof. Grant McTainsh.

"Any cars left outside last night were coated in a thin layer of red dust, and from samples collected off car bonnets we estimate that the dust was deposited at the rate of 0.57t/km² ; equivalent to 16,000 tonnes of deposition (or 4,000 semi-trailer loads) over the greater Brisbane region.

Professor McTainsh said Queensland,, parts of New South Wales Victoria and South Australia should brace for a severe dust storm season, driven by prolonged drought.

"While it's usual for western Queensland to experience dust storms between September and November, the severity of the drought in SE Queensland has produced wind erosion much further east than is usual. Inability of farmers to irrigate has also reduced crop cover and left soil exposed to wind-driven erosion."

"This erosion produces dust that engulfs rural towns and reaches as far as Brisbane and the south east. Later in the season we can expect dust activity to move further south towards NSW and Victoria."

Professor McTainsh and colleague Dr John Leys (NSW Dept of Environment and Climate Change) lead Dustwatch, an Australia-wide network of volunteer observers on the ground in rural Australia who record the timing, windspeed and characteristics of dust events.

Observations are combined with satellite images and meteorological records to create a picture to better understand and forecast dust events. The program now issues regular Dust Bulletins from its website: www.DustWatch.edu.au.

Professor McTainsh said dust events were increasingly affecting rural and city people alike, denuding already vulnerable farmland and reducing visibility in our coastal cities.

"Loss of fine silts, clays and organic matter from soils deplete their nutrient status, reducing productivity and in the long term increasing the economic cost of agricultural produce," he said.

Dustwatch at Griffith University is supported by the National Landcare Program, Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre and the Lower Murray Darling Catchment Management Authority.