



## Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry

### **Traralgon Community Consultation – Latrobe Performing Arts Centre, Traralgon, 11.00am, 16 April 2014** **Summary of discussion**

#### **Background**

The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry held its seventh community consultation at the Latrobe Performing Arts Centre in Traralgon at 11.00am on Wednesday, 16 April 2014. The community consultation was attended by 20 people. The following summary reports key themes and issues that were raised by community members during the consultation discussions. This summary reports on what was stated and does not attribute views to any or all community members.

#### **What worked well**

- Weather warnings in the lead up to 9 February 2014
- ABC local radio news and Gold 1242 (local radio)
- CFA information and Fire Ready App
- Local government had people prepared
- Social media for those who have access to it
- CFA volunteers willing to risk their lives and the immediate response to protect the community
- Skill levels of CFA fire fighters (protective clothing, trained, HAZMAT ready)
- Emergency services
- Technology applied to fight the fire – thermal imagery used to detect hot spots enabled effective use of suppression foam and targeted firefighting
- Laying of 300ml pipes by the mine once the fire started – done quickly and extensively
- OHS response to the first firefighter impacted by carbon dioxide levels was quick - respirators issued to monitor health
- Catering for volunteers, support of Red Cross and other charities, and community members
- Initial community consultations and meetings
- Department of Education evacuation of schools within the first week
- Taxi vouchers/free public transport
- Assistance for Health Care Card holders
- Vouchers for attractions as a way of offering respite
- Ambulance Victoria Assessment Centre

#### **What didn't work well**

- Proximity of the freeway to the mine, and the mine to the town
- Regulatory compliance at the mine
- Standards of maintenance of the mines, equipment and grounds since privatisation
- Lack of fire preparedness by the mine owner – it appears the coal faces weren't damped down on 9 February 2014, as used to be the case on high fire danger days
- The mine owner had no firefighting manpower, so was reliant on the CFA, and conducted no monitoring of air quality
- Water supply to the mine
- Lack of sprinklers, pipes and sprays, and no rehabilitation of the un-used parts of the mine (as compared with the practice at the Yallourn open cut)
- Absence of locally-held specialist firefighting equipment, which had to be brought in from interstate (Tasmania and Canberra)
- Firefighting response was too slow and was hindered by the forced re-routing of the CFA firefighters to get access to the western flank (no bridge following Morwell River diversion)

- Firefighter safety and health (water and air quality)
- The flow of information about the fire once it started was slow and conflicting
- Social media providing inaccurate information
- Government authorities, particularly the EPA and Department of Health providing conflicting and confusing information, particularly on air quality and pollution, which was too slow
- Concerns about the adequacy of air quality monitoring, and concerns about water quality, particularly tank water
- Absence of the mine owner at public information sessions
- No response or mention of mental health issues for a community which was under siege for a month
- Health concerns including general ill health, nose bleeds and night-time vomiting
- Evacuation issues - notification came too late for the elderly and nursing home residents, and was inconsistent where schools were concerned as not all schools relocated (teachers were asked to make the decision to evacuate, yet aren't qualified to do so); evacuation should have been broader
- Red tape around relocation and respite assistance meant that not all offers of assistance were taken up
- Financial support to relocate the elderly was not available
- Conflicting advice and information about the most appropriate way to clean fly ash
- No clean up assistance or information is available in Traralgon
- Limited knowledge about the free transport
- The community divisions created by the arbitrary division of Morwell and the discriminatory nature of assistance and support based on age, gender, disability status, and Health Care Card-holder status
- Abuse of financial grants and assistance
- Government employees being given paid time off, whilst other workers had to use their own leave entitlements
- Concerns about OH&S issues in workplaces in Morwell
- The impacts are not just in Morwell, other towns are also impacted - Leongatha, Churchill, Heyfield, Stratford
- Valley vets were told not to provide advice or release facts sheets
- Reports of damage to vehicles since the fire, in the form of pin holes of rust, with no advice provided on how to avoid this, nor compensation for the damage
- Concerns about financial impacts for businesses
- Arson penalties are not tough enough
- In 2006 the community was told 'this would never happen again'. Yet it did.

## What should be done differently

- Improve regulatory compliance; change the regulator (it shouldn't be DEPI), and implement penalties for non-compliance
- Improve perimeter security at the mine, especially on high fire danger days, to deter arsonists
- Improve maintenance/management of the fuel load at the perimeter of the mine
- Ensure the mine rehabilitation is completed to standard, and is compliant and safe
- Mine batters – need to be more stable and enable rehabilitation; the northern batter could be re-shaped and built as a fire-break with low grass which should be watered on high fire risk days to prevent fires spreading
- Specialist firefighting resources should be held at the mine, including better access to a water supply – pipes should have been in place
- Do more to reduce fire starts from arson – involve the community in surveillance and detection of suspicious characters, and explain arson detection and management processes so the community can be more involved
- Latrobe City Council should establish a coal mine fire readiness plan to include monitoring, messages, how we communicate, a firefighting response strategy, a particulate matter (PM) measure as a trigger for evacuation, and a clean up plan; and the strategy should be regularly reviewed
- Establish a coal mine fire response strategy – similar to the bush fire response plan – for individuals, the community and the power industry
- Fire and emergency plans should be regularly reviewed and re-evaluated to make sure they're current
- Earth movement should be monitored
- Create a larger, non-vegetation buffer zone around the mine
- Conduct a health assessment study on Morwell residents, and a long term health program of continuing health checks
- Residential clean up should be done more quickly and with sound environmental management of the run-off, and the use of high pressure hoses avoided in the presence of asbestos
- EPA monitoring of air quality should be improved
- Water supply infrastructure needs to improve
- Better advice to the community about air and water quality, and threshold levels for health impacts and how individuals should respond/manage their own response to pollution levels
- Noting the OH&S issues for workers, the Victorian Workcover Authority should be involved sooner
- Addressing mental health issues
- An evacuation plan should include a register of people prepared to take in evacuees, and a consistent approach to the evacuation of school children
- Establish an accommodation register that can be deployed immediately
- Assistance should be available regardless of status/station/income