



Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry

Churchill Community Consultation – Federation University Auditorium in Churchill, 1.30pm, 11 April 2014 Summary of discussion

Background

The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry held its fourth community consultation at the Federation University Auditorium in Churchill at 1.30pm on Friday, 11 April 2014. The community consultation was attended by 14 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

- ABC radio as a source of information
- Doorknocking in Morwell in the third week was appreciated
- CFA volunteers and website – credible information
- Relief centre volunteers
- Voices of the Valley information and meetings
- Bussing Morwell kids to other schools
- Free V-line travel
- Incident controllers' reports at public meetings
- The local community worked well together to support one another
- Those working on the ground in the mine worked well
- Trust in authority in some respects
- Local police presence

What didn't work well

- Lack of rehabilitation of unused parts of the mine by the mine owner
- Confusion about, and compliance with, the regulatory regime for mine management
- Firefighting efforts were not specific to a coal mine fire and local expertise was not sought
- The lack of locally held specialist firefighting equipment and specialist trained firefighting personnel - suppression foam had to be shipped in from interstate, and CFA volunteers are not trained in fighting coal mine fires
- Reduction in fire preparedness at the mine since privatisation, including: water sprays, reduction in fire personnel in mine, preparation for total fire ban days.
- Lack of preventive maintenance at the mine
- Confusion over whether the fire is out or not
- CFA short shift changes led to lots of change-overs and increased difficulties in planning and resourcing - the University in Churchill helped to house firefighters brought in, but was unclear about how many and when, and so was not able to provide appropriate support / amenities
- Coordination and command structure of inter-agency responses (MFB and CFA)

- Information from various government authorities, including the EPA, Department of Health and Latrobe City Council, was confusing, inaccurate, inadequate, too slow, not comprehensive enough, misleading, and did not take into account local expertise
- SMS and website information was too standardised and not detailed enough
- The local community trying to fill the gap where there should be a disaster response effort provided by government
- Confusion over who is who in government (all levels) and who is responsible for what - no one has taken responsibility or has made themselves accountable
- Poor media coverage – people were getting more information from interstate and overseas
- EPA testing and reporting – the focus was on PM 10 particulates across Victoria when the local issue in Morwell was more specifically PM 2.5 particulates
- The air quality at Latrobe Hospital was poor – the filters were only changed every two days
- Uncertainty over harmful particles and chemicals in the ash
- A great deal of concern around small children and their health
- Firefighters being exposed to poisons in the water and air
- Issues with access to assistance – the lack of support for those across the railway line and in other areas
- Late evacuation of people and insufficient opportunity for everyone; residents being told to go to locations and venues that were in the worst affected parts of the area; lack of viable options/resources to relocate
- No assessment of evacuees at relief centres before they were assigned accommodation
- Limited opening hours and information at the respite centre
- DHS debit cards were difficult to get and did not work
- Response was not practical or helpful; the recovery process is complex and it is unfair for local government to have to take responsibility for this on top of providing regular services
- It went on too long – 6 weeks – oppressive conditions to live in
- Lack of emotional and psychological support
- Government employees being treated differently to employees in non-government workplaces
- Adequacy of the clean up service: what gets cleaned and what doesn't; the inappropriateness of high pressure hoses in the presence of asbestos; use of unskilled people to clean up; allocation of buckets and gloves as opposed to professional cleaners - PM 2 particles stick to surfaces and have to be washed down with a special detergent
- Local businesses experiencing drops in revenue of up to 90 per cent

What should have been done differently

- Better regulation and oversight of the regulatory regime for the mine – management and rehabilitation – and transparent monitoring of it by government
- Mine rehabilitation
- Manage the proximity of vegetation to the mine, and review the plantations around the area
- Ensure the mine owner strengthens its fire plan and fire response, including returning the sprinklers
- Establish firefighting capability (equipment, trained resources and an inventory of specialist firefighting knowledge) specific to fighting coal mine fires
- Establish local fire plans, to be included in the municipal Emergency Recovery plans
- Review the chain of command and operational relationships between firefighting crews, professional and volunteers, the mine, etc. to see how effective this was for this particular type of fire
- Establish a formal recovery agency to handle/co-ordinate the recovery process which is complex
- Evacuation – evacuate early, use school camps, showgrounds and reserves, evacuate all children, and assess evacuees properly before they leave assessment centres
- Better resourced respite centres and more relocation options
- Government authorities should listen to the community
- Improve the communications and information from government authorities – more timely, more credible, more accurate, more consistent, and use a variety of communication tools
- Consider alternative energy sources and put power poles underground
- Monitor the health of residents, including an in-depth look at cancer rates in the area
- Simplify assistance/grants/claims procedures
- Support should be available to everybody equally, not just to segments of the community
- The government and the mine owner should be held accountable; the mine owner should compensate for the costs of evacuation, clean up and out of pocket expenses