



Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry

Moe Community Consultation – Moe Town Hall, 9.30am, 11 April 2014 Summary of discussion

Background

The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry held its third community consultation at the Moe Town Hall at 9.30am on Friday, 11 April 2014. The community consultation was attended by 22 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

- CFA pre-briefing in the lead up to the fire on the fire conditions, the website and information from the Fire Services Commissioner
- Not much
- Community resilience, coming together and good will – people responded well , but systemic responses weren't so good
- CFA firefighters
- ABC radio and local media coverage generally
- SES door-knocking
- Free transport, when it happened
- Some aspects of the community meetings
- Social media as a form of communication

What didn't work well

- Failure of governance and regulation
- Poor fire preparation by the mine owner, including the lack of sprinklers, lack of clay-capping, and the lack of an adequate fire plan
- Poor maintenance of fuel loads around the mine and along roadsides allowed the travel of the fire from Hernes Oak along the freeway
- Lack of specialist coal mine firefighting expertise (both at the mine and in the CFA)
- Inadequate access to and use of local expertise: mine, technical and firefighting
- Current fire service protection in the mine is ineffective; ineffective firefighting methods were applied (continual fine water spray is the most effective way to fight a brown coal fire, rather than water-bombing)
- Lack of appropriate firefighting equipment being held locally, and having to be brought in from interstate (Tasmania)
- CFA firefighters initial access to the mine was delayed because there is no bridge over the Morwell River diversion; the mine could have been closed to enhance the firefighting efforts diversion
- The buffer zone between the mine and residential properties is too small – it should be a 5-mile clearance
- State assets have become vulnerable over the years
- Response from government authorities was too slow; and all levels of government – local, state and federal - failed the local community, by not being present and not standing up for the community
- With the exception of local ABC radio, communications from authorities regarding air and water quality and monitoring, and the effects of fire/smoke/fly ash was conflicting, confusing, uncoordinated, inadequate and at times lacked credibility
- Outdoor workers, firefighters, mine workers and residents being exposed to bacterial infections arising from smoke, dust and ash for extended periods

- Lack of a health study in the Latrobe Valley
- Contradictory accounts of GP and hospital presentations remaining static or increasing; GPs not receiving advice on how to treat people for a month
- Mental health has been neglected (no recognition that people were getting sick)
- The impact on animals (livestock and pets); concerns about the long term effects on the health of livestock; whether local milk and meat supplies are contaminated by the fly ash and smoke
- Whole of Morwell should have been evacuated, not just those on health care cards or low income earners; and evacuation support should have been provided to all residents
- When the evacuation was announced (Friday afternoon) the DHS offices were closed, so no assistance was available
- Clean up was too slow; inadequate (buckets are useless and high pressure hoses inappropriate for use where asbestos is present); and too narrow in its remit (not covering roof cavities and insulation bat replacements)
- The cleaning was not a synchronized effort with controls for hazards, and the clean up crews included unemployed people with no training or skills
- The clean up was not extensive enough: it should be a professional decontamination, including roof and ceiling cavities, and all residents should be treated equally
- Individuals having to bear the financial costs – lost income and business revenue, medical expenses, the environmental impacts, the insurance, the clean-up, repairs/replacements to equipment/vehicles, vet bills etc
- Eligibility/entitlement issues regarding access to grants/financial/other assistance – there is confusion about who is entitled to what, what it should be spent on, and why the assistance is not available to everyone equally
- Response from insurance companies
- No recognition of mechanical issues for motor vehicles/buses/tractors due to ash in engine filters
- Confusion about whether the government or the mine owner is responsible
- The rehabilitation bond is too small
- Lack of explanation of why the operational needs of the Hazelwood mine were more important than the health of local residents

What should be done differently

- Without delay, install a robust, reticulated fire service in the mine, especially around abandoned faces that are drying out (the area of abandoned mine is increasing so there is a much higher ratio dried abandoned coal face than in the past, meaning there is a greater need for this to be addressed)
- Mandate the progressive rehabilitation and cover of abandoned faces using the \$15 million rehabilitation bond
- Revisit the regulatory regime to ensure robust maintenance of state assets
- Mandate effective fire responses in the mine, including better training of mine personnel, more vigilance and less reliance on mains power
- This was the first time a helicopter was used in firefighting at the mine – analysis is required to determine whether it enhanced, hindered or worsened firefighting efforts
- Clear fuel sources from around the mine, and on high fire danger days put in place up-wind patrols to deter arsonists
- Establish a helpline and assistance for animals (pets and livestock), particularly in relation to evacuation, injury and the cost burden
- Upgrade the protection of assets, both resources and infrastructure, that have national/international significance
- Respond to recommendations of previous and current inquiries
- Fix government and private monitoring and regulatory regimes
- Safeguards are needed to address long term health implications
- Assess the ash and residual particulate matters in roofs
- Implement improved monitoring of air and water quality
- Better, co-ordinated response and communications from all levels of government Establish a co-ordinated emergency management system known by all relevant stakeholders (community, government agencies etc) that clearly details responsibilities and expectations
- Establish an informed clean up process and information that can be readily accessed by everyone, and have all homes cleaned by professionals
- Agencies must all use a common language and consistent messaging
- Acknowledge the 2014 fire as a mine fire, and as a disaster
- Move the town before the next fire
- Address the arsonist issue
- Look to the current Yallourn practice that is better than Hazelwood (Yallourn still has a fire services group)