



Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry

Morwell Community Consultation – Kernot Hall, Morwell, 6.30pm, 15 April 2014 Summary of discussion

BACKGROUND

The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry held its fifth community consultation at Kernot Hall in Morwell at 6.30pm on Tuesday, 15 April 2014. The community consultation was attended by 60 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

- Warnings about the fire conditions leading up to 9 February 2014
- Active area of the mine was prepared
- Phone text emergency warnings and social media (for those who use it)
- Putting the fire out/fire services response (particularly in Wallace Street)
- The Fire Ready App
- ABC radio updates
- Police communications and information
- Helicopter water-bombing of houses
- CFA booths and door knocking
- Victoria Police road blocks
- Community meetings were well organised
- CFA and MFB inter-agency firefighting efforts
- Red Cross and other agency assistance
- EPA and other state agencies, eventually; EPA air quality monitoring
- Information provided by the Fire Services Commissioner
- Community volunteers feeding the CFA crews
- Respite centre was a good idea
- Relocation grants for those who needed them
- Ambulance Victoria Assessment Centres
- Free transport and vouchers as respite options
- Some Early Learning Centres and schools responded well
- Community support and assistance
- Extra police to patrol/protect evacuated properties
- For some people, insurance has worked well (private)

What didn't work well

- Government regulation (of the mine) – failed to hold the mine owners accountable
- Removal of water sprinklers from the mine, the north and south batters need to be fire-proofed

- Lack of remediation at the mine, resulting in environmental and community impacts; the mine rehabilitation bond of \$15 million is inadequate
- The absence of specific coal mine firefighting expertise in the CFA; lack of specialist firefighting equipment being on hand (suppression foam having to be shipped in from Tasmania)
- The use of helicopter water-bombing to fight a coal mine fire
- Local mining/firefighting expertise should have been called upon sooner
- Firefighting resources were diverted to the plantation fire rather than the mine fire
- Roadblocks hindering firefighting, and stopping people accessing their own properties
- Lack of fuel reduction around the perimeter of the open cut, including grass in Wallace Street and wood/rubbish in Driffield Road; fire breaks not being maintained (especial danger north of Morwell bordering plantations)
- Paid versus volunteer firefighters
- The CFA should have learned from the 2006 fire and improved their equipment and training standards
- The lack of data/information/knowledge, which had to be sourced from New Zealand
- The plantations being located close to the mine
- No basic emergency plan
- Media coverage was slow to start
- Information and communications from government authorities, including the EPA and Department of Health, was conflicting, confusing, misleading, lacking in guidance, not comprehensive, inadequate, and too slow
- Limited information was given to the deaf community, multicultural community, and those with no smart phones, internet or access to social media
- Slow response from local, state and federal members and agencies
- Road blocks and road closures meant people couldn't get into Morwell to collect medical equipment
- Businesses were not advised whether they should continue to operate
- It should have been declared a disaster/state of emergency – there was little media coverage of an event that directly impacted 75,000 people
- Concerns about the quality of air monitoring conducted by the EPA - PM 2.5 measure should have been used as a measure for evacuation; only tested for carbon monoxide, benzene and other chemicals were overlooked
- Concerns about whether the water used by the helicopter to water-bomb was contaminated
- Concerns that the ash and other harmful properties are still in the air
- The psychological impacts on children – observations of behaviours that were not present previously, such as pre-occupation with cleaning, air quality, and general anxiousness and clinginess
- Concerns about the mental health of people in the community
- Medical symptoms not present previously (not limited to): metal taste in mouth, sore eyes and throat, asthma, rashes and itchiness, headaches, nose bleeds, kidney problems, low/high blood pressure, heart and other angina-related issues
- Carers and staff at the hospital and other services becoming ill
- The community, particularly school children, should have been evacuated in the first week
- The recovery response was too slow – there was no information about the respite centre until weeks later, respirators weren't provided to the elderly for three weeks, evacuation of the elderly was too late, lack of support for people with mental health issues and disabilities, dust masks were not provided quickly enough
- Lack of coordination in relief and recovery services (having to go to various places for help only to be told they can't access it, contact phone numbers not working, agencies not being aware people would be contacting them for assistance) – people were treated poorly
- The respite payment came too late and was not available to everyone
- Veterinary issues – illness, evacuation/relocation of animals
- Limitations of the relocation assistance and clean up assistance being offered to Health Care Card holders
- Clean up assistance being limited (vacuuming and dusting only); allocation of buckets was an insult
- Homes being unsafe due to ash residue in/on soft furnishings and floor coverings (couches, carpets)
- The arbitrary line at Commercial Road, which divided the community
- Absence of the mine owner in the early stages, and the lack of information about the fire since the mine was handed back
- No federal assistance
- Discrimination in, and allocation of, funds without accountability (abuse of payments handed out)
- Cost recovery for medical support and professional cleaning

- Inequities because Government employees were sent home on pay while other employees weren't, and had to use their personal leave entitlements
- Workcover issues for workers who had to stay at work
- No insurance for some people; those who have insurance not being covered for cleaning costs
- Uncertainties for tenants in rental properties, particularly if they don't have insurance
- Environmental and health concerns about where the run-off from all the clean up water is going
- The prioritisation of infrastructure over the health of Latrobe Valley residents and workers
- Authorities appear not to have learned from previous fire and flood inquiries and royal commissions

What should be done differently

- Regulators need to regulate, and apply penalties for breaches of regulation of the mine
- Fire preparedness at the mine - the sprinklers should be returned and a fully-trained fire crew should be retained on site
- Rehabilitate old parts of the mine and seal un-used parts
- Increase the mine remediation fund of \$15 million
- Improve fuel reduction generally, and around the perimeter of the mine (five mile perimeter)
- Bring expertise in sooner rather than later, and provide specialist training for firefighters
- Firefighting foam needs to be available/stored locally, at the mine
- Establish an independent authority to manage fire protection and firefighting in the Valley (specialist skills needed), reporting regularly to Government
- Conduct annual reviews of fire management plans
- Develop a flood/fire/emergency response that includes a trigger point (drawn from known data) to determine what and when information assistance is provided to the impacted community(ies)
- Authorities should communicate with communities sooner, and with more honesty and integrity
- Improve warning systems, similar to the cyclone warnings used in Queensland
- Community education about warning systems
- Better information about what the different pollution measures mean in terms of community safety, and the appropriate action to take for various pollution levels, to provide a better understanding about the impacts of pollution
- Deal with land slippage and relocate the highway away from the open cut
- Err on the side of caution and make health the priority - establish a local health register, and conduct a study on the long term health effects; conduct a 'Toxin Inquiry'
- Address the mental health issues, including for children
- Improve EPA monitoring and release of EPA data
- Provide more and streamlined government assistance for relocation – early evacuation of school children, better evacuation and care options for pets, better co-ordination of relocation options, and improve the quality of equipment/materials provided (better filters and masks)
- Improve the clean up assistance generally, and clean all of Morwell's roof cavities, noting the asbestos-related risks need to be managed
- Avoid creating artificial boundaries and dividing communities
- Will the government or the mine owner foot the bill/provide compensation for clean up costs, drop in property prices, lost business revenue, lost income, medical costs etc ?
- Conduct a long term financial impact analysis – business revenue and property prices
- Re-instatement of leave where people had to use their leave entitlements
- Consider the development of a long term positive vision for Morwell and the Latrobe Valley, with a reduced reliance on a single-industry economy
- Implement a monitoring mechanism for any recommendations arising from this inquiry, akin to the position of Bushfires Implementation Monitor, and for regulatory frameworks generally