



Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry

Morwell Community Consultation – Morwell Bowling Club, 7.00am, 16 April 2014 **Summary of discussion**

Background

The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry held its sixth community consultation at the Morwell Bowling Club at 7.00am on Wednesday, 16 April 2014. The community consultation was attended by 18 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

- Fire Ready App, CFA text message, and CFA information to the public and at meetings; and information from the Fire Services Commissioner
- Firefighters
- Emergency services (including the rostering and local accommodation arrangements)
- Ambulance Victoria and community health centres
- EPA response and website
- The quick response from grass roots agencies (not for profit/non-government organisations)
- Community pride, collaboration and support – phone trees and door knocks, and the Morwell CBD Traders group
- Community information sessions
- Relocation of some of the school kids
- Provision of respite centre – the variety of staff and information (including EPA staff on site)
- Free travel offers
- Victoria Police security in evacuated areas
- Nothing / not much

What didn't work well

- Authorities not learning from the past - there have been four natural disasters, and five mine incidences in the last seven years
- Govt failure to hold the mine owners accountable for maintenance and rehabilitation compliance obligations
- Lack of firefighting equipment and personnel at the mine (removal of water pumps, hydrants, pipes, sprays and dedicated/trained fire crews since privatisation)
- Poor fire preparation at the mine (no adequate back up pumps, no suppression foam on hand), despite advice the fire risk for 9 February 2014 was as bad as that for Black Saturday
- Inadequate management of the fuel load around the mine
- Mine water pumps are reliant on power, not diesel; pumps relying on 240v power without backup is poor planning
- Seemed to be no understanding at the outset that a mine fire could last for weeks
- Regulation of the management/rehabilitation of un-used parts of the mine, which should have been clay-capped
- Freeway closure due to flooding at the mine resulting from inadequate maintenance
- The Hernes Oak gully was left to burn while the firefighting effort was concentrated on Driffield
- The CFA website didn't show where the actual firefront was
- Authorities relying on web-based, text-based, internet-based communications, which may not be appropriate for everyone in the community, nor reach everyone (reliance on text messaging not appropriate for elderly residents)
- Noticeable absence of the local member
- Inconsistent advice about health issues, and a lack of representation from the Department of Health at the first few community meetings and consultations
- The response from authorities, including evacuation advice, was too slow; the health warnings for asthmatics and evacuation of elderly residents was too late in coming

- When the smoke was at its worst, the CFA van at Coles was closed so residents couldn't get information; and the EPA staff had masks but would not provide them to residents who had to go to Moe to get them
- Concerns about ongoing health problems
- EPA air quality monitoring and information was inadequate, and did not provide comprehensive information on particulate matter (PM) rates – the air quality should have been tested in the first few hours, not the soil; and EPA monitoring stations were in unusual places
- Concerns about the adequacy of road closures and road blocks – in some cases hindering people's access to their own properties to feed livestock or allow water tankers in to replace water used for firefighting/protection, and in others allowing people to access areas they shouldn't have
- Forced evacuation for people in rural properties, contrary to established personal fire plans
- Community dislocation caused by the arbitrary division of Morwell – the fire affected the whole community
- Discriminatory nature of the DHS response based on whether or not an individual had a Health Care Card (pregnant woman upset by being told not eligible for relocation assistance because not in receipt of Centrelink benefits)
- Residents who work and pay taxes - 'the working poor' - weren't eligible for assistance and were treated as second class citizens when they did seek assistance from the government
- Abuse of DHS funds/grants
- The incident went on for too long, with local community members, especially those who could not relocate or evacuate, relentlessly exposed to smoke and ash
- The masks were useless
- Lack of support for elderly residents who might be confused, may not have received text messages, and did not want to evacuate/relocate
- Clean up issues – the buckets are inadequate, and cleaning of public places (streets) is being carried out when priority should be given to cleaning people's houses
- Inadequacy of clean up options – car wash offered after the event by which time damage had already been done; \$15 laundry voucher was offered when the laundering costs (every item of clothing and linen has to be cleaned) has been \$50 per week
- The residual ash in the roof spaces of the houses
- Not everyone has insurance, not all insurance companies are covering cleaning and replacement of insulation, and the response from insurance companies is too slow
- Impact on small business – drop in revenue and delay in advice regarding financial assistance from the government creating/contributing to financial hardship (was told 4-day wait, waited 1 month)
- Small Business Victoria survey of small business (1 motel and 4 retailers) was too limited
- Spiralling costs of managing the impacts, including individuals having to pay for professional cleaning

What should be done differently

- Regulatory compliance
- Rehabilitation standards at the mine need to be higher
- Mine rehabilitation, which must include firefighting infrastructure being in place, and clay capping
- Essential firefighting resources needed for a coal mine fire (suppression foam, helicopter and trained firefighters) should be available in the Valley at all times
- Water supply at the mine site to fight the fire
- Manage sustained arson attacks in the area
- Accuracy of information (particularly media reports)
- Keep press from public meetings, to allow people the freedom to have a say.
- Authorities should take into account local and grass roots information
- Conduct an ongoing health study on long term health effects, including asbestosis and silicosis
- Management of health for mine workers and those who worked in the mine responding to fire
- Enhance the monitoring of air quality to include carbon monoxide
- Monitor the quality and availability of water for drinking and cleaning
- Consideration be given the proximity of the mine to the town
- Evacuation
- Lessons to be learned from an unprecedented event such as this one, including the need for appropriate firefighting equipment and infrastructure, the need to deal with arsonists, and an improved community response
- Streamline the approach to recovery, through better information through a single avenue (1 radio station)
- Provide care, financial support and services equally to all residents, not just to those who have Health Care Cards
- Assistance for damaged fences should be available not just for fences that adjoin nature reserves
- Improve clean up assistance – it needs to be done more quickly and thoroughly
- Establish a government assessment/assessor process to facilitate a consistent approach and quicker response from insurance companies