

SUBMISSION TO HAZELWOOD MINE FIRE ENQUIRY

Submitters:

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Terms of Reference

7. Short, medium and long term measures are needed to improve the health of the La Trobe Valley communities having regard to any health impacts as identified by the Board as being associated with the Hazelwood Mine Enquiry.

INTRODUCTION

This Submission has been prepared to support the work of the Voices of the Valley. It is not a detailed scientific document as we do not have relevant and accurate data and information.

At present there is a great deal of anxiety in the Latrobe Valley concerning the future health impacts from the Mine Fire. As a state we have the responsibility to look after everyone, and the Government has a responsibility to advocate for the health of all. The Hazelwood Mine Fire was a National Disaster but not treated like one by the Government at the time of the Mine Fire.

In this submission we want to raise this issue, which we believe needs addressing, to prevent further deterioration of people's health in the future and to raise awareness of the health dangers present in these workplaces.

SYSTEMATIC DECONTAMINATION OF ASH IN ROOF CAVITIES

From The Coalface by Tom Doig:

A Thick Gluey Goo

“Michelle’s dog Chooch became very ill within 2 days of the start of the fire. Chooch had a build up of ash in her fur and every night at dusk, as it became dewy, the moisture turned the ash into a caustic alkaline paste. It was sticky, like superglue and really hard to remove. The coal ash paste caused irritation all over Chooch’s body and when she tried to lick it off, she swallowed it. This made her intestines swell up until she started bleeding internally.”

The Vet did a number of tests, which showed the dog had chemicals in her system that she couldn’t have ingested in an ordinary back yard. These included traces of chemical retardant that was being sprayed on the Hazelwood fire a few metres away from Michelle’s house.

Whenever it rained, Michelle noticed that there was a fine residue in the ash on the pavement - a bit like pollen except instead of being yellow, it was bright pink. At the same time, the coal ash paste that nearly killed Chooch had also stuck to their tiles, and was eating through the canopy in the back garden. It was in their trees too, and when it rained a thick gluey goo would drip slowly from the branches onto the lawn.

From information we have received there does not appear to be a systematic decontamination of the roof cavities of affected houses which contain ash after the Mine Fire. There is also not a reporting of the composition of the ash. I have found reports on the EPA website of water, soil and ash sampling results from 24 February, 2014.

Important information about the composition of the ash sitting in the roof cavities has not been available. It may be available to the Inquiry and to others. **However, this information is needed by the community so they understand what substances are in**

the ash currently sitting above their areas where they live, cook, eat and sleep.

From the story above, it can be seen that the smoke, ash and pollution was not the same as the 'normal' pollution being emitted from the Hazelwood Power Station. This was different in that other chemicals were present from the fighting of the Hazelwood Mine Fire and that the coal was burning in a fire situation not in the power station.

Coal ash is the product left after **coal** is combusted or burned. It is a dangerous mix of arsenic, lead, mercury and other poisons. A new report **Coal Ash**, the toxic threat to our health and environment has been published by Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) in the USA. Dec 21, 2010

Information from Voices of the Valley surveys show that **people who have had their houses decontaminated are having improvements in their health.** However, there does not appear to be any systematic approach to determining the extent of the numbers of dwellings that require decontamination.

After speaking with the Voices of the Valley, they suggested that the dwellings most affected would be in Morwell, adjacent to the Hazelwood Mine. This town is located 400metres from the Hazelwood Mine and suffered the greatest affect from the smoke and ash and particulate pollution from the fire.

These stories have a common thread of fear and anger in the community, also a strong feeling that the State Government was concerned about reducing these feelings of fear in the community and as a result were "keeping a lid on the health concerns."

HOW MANY HOUSES TO BE DECONTAMINATED?

No-one knows- no systemic surveying has been done. Whose responsibility is it? Who should be responsible.

From everything I have read it is a toxic cocktail that if it isn't fixed now will be like Mr Fluffy in Canberra.

So I will use Morwell as an example:

From the ABS 2011

Australia | Victoria | State Suburbs

Morwell

Code SSC20929 (SSC)

People	14,005
Male	6,898
Female	7,107
Median age	40



Families	3,608
Average children per family	1.8



All private dwellings	6,761
Average people per household	2.2
Median weekly household income	\$732
Median monthly mortgage repayments	\$990
Median weekly rent	\$150
Average motor vehicles per dwelling	1.4

From the ABS 2011, it shows that 63% of homes are owner occupied or owned with a mortgage and 32.5% rented. There are aged care facilities and Office of Housing dwellings included.

Some houses have been decontaminated, including ceiling cavities vacuumed and insulation replaced. *Does anyone know how many homes have been decontaminated?*

The survey by Voices of the Valley, of 200 homes in Morwell, only 7% have been decontaminated.

Discussions with people in homes that have been decontaminated reveal that this is a difficult task, and requires professionals. This is a health and safety issue as Coal ash from the fire is toxic.

The cleaning and decontamination of the houses depended on who owned the property. We have heard that many houses were cleaned however, walls were wiped only to arm height, and the roof cavities were never touched!

This also a complex issue depending on who owns the house:

- The biggest barrier to decontamination is the large cost of decontamination- about \$20,000 per house.
- Whether insurance was willing to cover it,
- Whether the family could afford the excess on the policy to have their home professionally decontaminated,
- If the home was owned by a landlord, then the tenant has no control over the decontamination of their home,
- If the home was owned by the Ministry of Housing, then the Office of Housing is responsible.
- This is even more problematic as there is no real data being collected by Latrobe City Council on the number of houses cleaned.

Then there is the contamination in publicly used facilities like schools, child care centres, the neighbourhood house, kindergartens, aged care facilities, sporting clubs and community amenities. This also requires attention as innocent members of the community have unknowingly been placed at risk and in these circumstances they will be unaware of the health implications.

There has been no systematic survey of houses in the Latrobe Valley to ascertain the number and levels of ash present in the houses.

It should not be the responsibility of community volunteers to do this survey.

Ash remains in many of the 7,000 houses in Morwell. If the medium to long-term health of the community is to be addressed, then assessment of the number of premises requiring decontamination needs to be ascertained.

The cleaning of the roof cavities needs to be thoroughly investigated and resolved as a matter of urgency. Each day that these innocent residents are being exposed to these risks increases the possibility of serious health outcomes. This should not be an ad hoc situation.

It is important to note that if only 7% of houses have been decontaminated in Morwell then there are approximately 6000 houses that may need decontaminating.

As I don't have information to accurately estimate this, in a best case scenario, if 50% of houses require decontamination, this is a massive clean up effort.

It should not be left to individuals dealing with insurances companies in a piecemeal manner and this is what is currently happening.

A way forward may be a joint task force with Latrobe City Council, State Government, Office of Housing and the Insurance Council of Australia. This was a national disaster and should have an appropriate community response as these residents are living with the consequences every day.

Where GDP Suez fits into this situation is to be determined.

JOB CREATION IN THE LATROBE VALLEY

If there is a massive decontamination of houses required in the Latrobe Valley then there is the possibility of skilling up a workforce from the Valley to undertake the decontamination of these homes.

This could have the positive effect of decontamination of homes and providing people with skills and accreditation for new jobs. This would be a significant win for a community that is suffering economically, as well as emotionally.