

# HAZELWOOD MINE FIRE INQUIRY

## Submission cover sheet

Post your submission with this cover sheet to:

Submissions Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry  
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Email your submission with this cover sheet to [info@hazelwoodinquiry.vic.gov.au](mailto:info@hazelwoodinquiry.vic.gov.au).

Title: MR	First Name: William	Surname: Brown
Organisation represented (if applicable): Ex Fire Service Officer Morwell Mine		
Email address:	[REDACTED]	
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<input type="checkbox"/> Origin and circumstances of fire <input type="checkbox"/> Measures by Hazelwood Coal Mine to prevent fire <input type="checkbox"/> Application and administration of regulatory regimes <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please state)	Response to fire by: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hazelwood Coal Mine <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Emergency Services <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental Agencies <input type="checkbox"/> Public Health Officials <input type="checkbox"/> Other Government Agencies	

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Date 9/4/2014

## **1. Introduction**

Brown Coal Open Cut Mines are vulnerable from the threat of fire, whether it be internal or external. In the past 80 years Brown Coal Mines have been part & parcel of the Latrobe Valleys landscape, with 3 major towns Traralgon, Morwell and the now defunct Yallourn, sited very close to open cut mines. Therefore it is imperative that these mines comply with State Government Acts pertaining to open cuts, namely the Fire Service Policy and Code of Practice, which is put in place to protect the mine its personnel and general public from any threat such as fire which may compromise their overall wellbeing.

## **2. History**

In the Valleys long history of open cut coal mines, numerous fires have occurred, some serious, the 2 most significant being the 1944 Yallourn and the 1977 Morwell open cut fires. Following the fire at the Morwell Open Cut in 1977 the then State Electricity Commission of Victoria carried out a comprehensive review of fire protection, drawing on the many years of open cut operations and experience gained from general fire service operation and several open cut fires. This culminated in the Fire Service Policy & Code of Practice being implemented in 1980. This policy fulfils the requirements of the Country Fire Authority Act 1958 for protection against fire and complies with the Emergency Management Act 1986 and is applicable to the 3 Open Cut Mines in the Latrobe Valley.

## **3. Fire Service Policy & Code of Practice**

The policy lays down the strategies, standards of fire protection and procedures to be followed, in the operation of a fire suppression system that is designed to cope with any fire emergency that may threaten the mine and environs.

## **4. Actions that needed to be carried out on the day**

As a previous Fire Officer in the Morwell Mine I have from time to time had to deal with serious fire issues in the open cut, although the Fire Policy doesn't physically extinguish fires, adherence to it certainly reduces the severity of the fire event, enhances health and safety and reduces downtime to coal winning plant. Therefore I find it difficult to comprehend how this fire spread so quickly in such a short period of time, if the Fire Policy & Code of Practice had been in place and followed. With this in mind I believe these questions below need answers -

- Knowing it was to be a high fire danger day were the appropriate fire precautions put in place early in the day, such as arranging to have employees come in early to commence coal spraying activities, before conditions deteriorated?
- Given the forecast for the day was there any consideration given to declaring a mine Fire Alert early in the day?

- Considering the weather forecast for the day was there an early inspection of all critical fire and dewatering pump installations to ensure pumps were operational and on standby?
- Why did critical fire pumps fail again, as in previous fires causing loss of water supply in the mine hindering fire fighting efforts. Where the birds mouth sprays operating to protect electric supply cables down batters. Are the duplicate electrical supplies to all critical pump stations still connected and geographically separated as per the policy?
- Was the piped water reticulation system in place as per the policy, if not where portable rotary sprays set up to cover this vulnerable area of exposed coal, as per the policy?
- Being a high fire danger day were the 2 Fire Tankers manned up and operational as per the policy?

### **5. Breaches of the Fire Policy**

Fourteen days into the fire I was invited by C.Lapsley Fire Commissioner for Victoria to accompany him on an inspection of the mine fire, during this inspection I noticed several breaches of the Fire Policy by the mine operators, giving me the impression that the Fire Policy is only being partially complied with and not taken seriously.

### **6. Statutory Fire Authorities**

In my inspection of the mine with Commissioner Lapsley I was unconvinced with some of the fire fighting methods used by the C.F.A in extinguishing this mine fire. I believe some of the methodology used may have prolonged the fire duration.

My observations were -

- Helicopters have there place in fire suppression, however I am of the belief they are more suitable and efficient in combating fires on the coal levels, than fighting batter fires.
- Over the years the mine has experienced numerous batter fires and all have been successfully extinguished in a short period of time with relatively simple methods, including the use of bulldozers, excavators and plenty of water and manpower.
- I also believe there is a need for the C.F.A to revise some of their work practices, when it comes to fighting coal fires, such as better co-ordination and more efficient use of the fire fighting teams at the fire front.
- In the many years the C.F.A and the mine have had cause to work together in combating open cut fires there seems to be an over reliance on fire tankers, even when piped water is readably available.

## **7. Conclusion**

No amount of preparation is going to eradicate fires from occurring in the open cut mines, however it is my fervent belief that if the Fire Service policy & Code of Practice is in place and followed to its full entirety, any outbreak of fire in the mine or environs will not reach the same magnitude as the recent Morwell fire due to the fire systems in place.