

HAZELWOOD MINE FIRE INQUIRY

Submission cover sheet

Post your submission with this cover sheet to:

Submissions Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry
PO Box 3460
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Title: MR	First Name: HOWARD	Surname: WILLIAMS
Organisation represented (if applicable):		
Email address:	[REDACTED]	
Postal address:	Monwell	
Telephone:	Mobile: [REDACTED]	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Origin and circumstances of fire <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Measures by Hazelwood Coal Mine to prevent fire <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Application and administration of regulatory regimes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (please state) Communication Response	Response to fire by: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hazelwood Coal Mine <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Emergency Services <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Environmental Agencies <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public Health Officials <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other Government Agencies	

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J Williams

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Date

8/5/14.

SUBMISSION TO HAZELWOOD MINE FIRE INQUIRY

HOWARD WILLIAMS

Thursday, 8 May 2014

Dear Board of Inquiry

My name is Howard Williams and I have a house with my wife, Rosemary, at [REDACTED] Morwell; our property is on the south side of the street and our back fence is adjacent to the Princes Freeway, Morwell By-pass.

As an active community member, I was called on to provide local knowledge and advice to the RCC Emergency Management Team (EMT). I am currently one of the community members representing Morwell residents on the Community Advisory Group. In addition to this role I have a number of other roles in the Gippsland & Victorian community; Chair Baw Baw Latrobe LLEN, Membership Officer Advance Morwell (including nurturing the Morwell CBD Traders group), executive member & Trustee Gippsland Trades & labour Council, secretary Gippsland Sports Academy Board, secretary Latrobe Valley Volleyball Inc, previous vice president Morwell Football & Netball Club & committee member MFNC PP&O, executive Board member Volleyball Victoria, member VV Country Championships Commission & Technical Delegate to the 2014 Championships being hosted in Leongatha June 8, 9 & 10. I am a former secondary school teacher and administrator with major studies in Biology, Chemistry & Physical Sciences.

I would like to present you with some background, learnings and issues and concerns that I have relating to the fire that engulfed the Hazelwood mine on 9 February 2014 and how the response was managed.

I would be willing to provide a statement and give evidence at the upcoming hearings if requested.

Preparations week of Feb 3- 8

The weather forecast was for hot & windy weather leading up to what was predicted to be a bad weekend for fire conditions. I spent the week removing leaf litter from our home & mentally thinking about a fire plan. When the bushfire at Hernes Oak ignited I was very concerned as fires in this location have threatened Morwell & the Yallourn Open cut mine previously. We were reasonably well prepared and when by Saturday Feb 8 the Hernes Oak bush fire was still very active we were prepared for the possibility of evacuation.

Feb 9

On the Sunday I monitored the CFA & BOM websites & at one stage thought that a reported fire at Yinnar would threaten my son's property near Jeeralang Junction. Fortunately this fire turned out to be a more distant fire the had been misreported however by early afternoon it was clear that Morwell would be in the path of by now two bushfires and at some point we received a telephone alert to evacuate so I asked my son to evacuate my wife while I remained in Wallace St to keep hoses running and damp down our home to defend it from potential ember attack that may have emanated from the Freeway reserve. The Freeway reserve sound mound & vegetation is a fire hazard that is not well maintained for a urban environment and previous fires had run along the Freeway median immediately west of the town. We also have several large eucalypt trees, other native plants and significant amount of leaf litter mulch from our own trees, neighbours & those in the reserve.

I chose to stay & fight to prevent ember attack but assured my family that the risk was likely to come from the south west and so it should be relatively easy to escape into the town if the danger increased. I spent the rest of the afternoon & early evening running up and down ladders to block drain pipes, position and run hoses & ensure that as much of the property remained damp. As the fire got closer & the smoke thickened it was difficult to work out where the seat of the fire was and my phone app wasn't of any use to get that precise information. Some neighbours were in the street reporting information relayed by phone from either volunteer fire fighters or scanners monitoring radio messages. At one point I drove to the end of Wallace Street & could see the fire in the Yarra Gum reserve 150m away and security staff putting out embers at the Bowling Club, it wasn't clear that any fire fighters were in the vicinity. I immediately returned home fully expecting that the fire would continue along the Freeway reserve and the homes in Wallace Street would suffer ember attack. The smoke and ash was quite thick and it was like twilight even though it was too early for that. At some stage the fire front appeared to have passed to the east of our home & the wind had swung around to the south east at that stage I realised that it hadn't continued along the Freeway Reserve but was in the older section of the open cut behind our place and towards the eastern end. I drove towards the former SEC offices to see if I could work out where the fire was & if the threat remained. I saw fire race up an old gum tree that appeared to explode near the now CFMEU offices, police had blocked access to this area. I returned home and as the fire was now raging in the unworked section of the open cut and there were loud explosions I continued to keep my property damp in case the fire spotted onto the Freeway Reserve nearby. I did see a fire truck drive down Wallace St. and at some stage someone turned off our front tap that was feeding a sprinkler on the roof so tight that I needed tools to loosen it again.

I continued to check our property and at night it was clear that the open cut was blazing right around 3 sides similar if not greater than in 1977. Later in the evening I accompanied a LV Express photographer outside our back fence onto the mound to photograph the fire; we could see fire moving up what we assumed were conveyer belts with periodic explosions. I contacted my family and arranged a transfer of clothing etc & continued to monitor the fire until 2.00am.

Although conditions not good my wife returned home on Monday morning expecting that the surface fire would be controlled in a few days. However despite the almost constant daily use of helicopter water bombing the fire continued with significant smoke and ash all week.

I was also perplexed & sceptical by statements made by a GDF Suez spokesperson that there had been no explosions in the mine. I had heard & seen many incidents that could only be described as explosions. It seemed that from the very start there was an attempt to play down the seriousness of the incident.

Public meeting on Friday, 14 February 2014

As a concerned citizen I attended the first public meeting relating to the incident on Friday, 14 February at Kernot Hall, with the CFA/MFB Incident Controllers, Chief Health Officer, Rosemary Lester, EPA officers etc in attendance.

The information provided that evening didn't seem totally plausible. For example:

- Authorities weren't able to explain why the fire had not been put out.
- Ms Rosemary Lester was telling residents not to worry about the smoke and ash.

- People were raising questions about the particulate matter; Ms Lester advised that masks could be worn if people had concerns but no masks were available.
- When residents asked about carbon dioxide levels, Ms Lester told us not to be worried and that the carbon dioxide risk was confined to the mine itself.

Conditions worsen on Saturday, 15 February 2015

The following day, Saturday, 15 February 2015, the quality of the air seemed to deteriorate considerably and it was a struggle for me to breathe freely when walking between shops.

Concerned about the air quality, I set out to find masks as advised by the Chief Health Officer but the only masks available in town were ungraded surgical masks, not the ones that we were recommended.

Later on that day, we both heard on the radio that due to carbon dioxide levels, people should take refuge in their houses and close their windows and doors or relocate if possible. Given my formal academic training I thought this advice to be particularly poor. My wife was not well & has reduced lung capacity so we immediately decided to re-locate to our son's home in Jeeralang & subsequently to Bairnsdale. We have decided to stay in Bairnsdale because the smoke and ash rendered our home inhabitable. Now that the surface fire is controlled we are still not able to return to our home in Morwell as it remains impacted by odour & ash however the Insurance Company hasn't agreed what remediation they will undertake or when they will authorise works as they claim the mine fire isn't out! I don't know when we will be able to return.

Recruitment to Hazelwood Incident Management Team

At some point, before the afternoon of Monday, 17 February 2014, I received a phone call from Advance Morwell President John Guy, telling me that I would soon receive a phone call to join the RCC Emergency Management Team. As I understood it, three community members would be recruited to provide the Emergency Management Team with local knowledge and advice - John, Max Williamson and myself. Max is a retired engineer who used to work for the SEC & was in charge of the Hazelwood Mine & oversaw the fighting of the 1977 mine fire.

Not having any previous detailed knowledge of Emergency management I believe it was extremely useful to have community members on the RCC Emergency Management Team to provide advice about culture, communications/messaging and to tell the team how well it was or wasn't doing from a community perspective.

I was, however, surprised that other people weren't involved or included on the RCC Emergency Management Team or receivers of information coming out of the EMT meetings. For example, I don't believe that Russell Northe our MP, or local councillors were briefed or included in any of the meetings. As far as I knew, GDF Suez & Energy Australia had a seat at the table of the RCC Emergency Management fire meetings, but GDF Suez were rarely present or provided comment, at the Hazelwood mine fire meetings.

I am also surprised that even though Max was a part of the EMT, he was never asked about his knowledge and/or experience managing the 1977 Hazelwood mine fire. From what I know about the fires, both were similar in size.

Instead of tapping into local knowledge about how to fight brown coal fires, the EMT called upon firefighters in Queensland and New South Wales. These states may know how

to manage black coal fires, but if its brown coal you want to know about, you are better talking to experts in Latrobe Valley or overseas where brown coal is mined.

Responding to the Hazelwood mine fire

I am concerned that the EMT did not seek local expertise and knowledge to help respond to the Hazelwood mine fire. I am also concerned about resource allocation, 'water balance', asset protection and communications.

Resource allocation

The number of resources available to fight the Hazelwood mine fire seemed to fluctuate from day to day. I don't believe this lent itself to the best attack strategy and it may have contributed to community lack of confidence and an increase in community stress and anxiety.

For the first four days in particular we had a helicopters fighting the fire. When the helicopters left, the community thought that the fire was maybe under control and no longer needed, but then we were told that efforts had to be reduced because there were concerns about the stability of the mine batters.

'Water balance'

When the community was told that water bombing may increase the instability of the mine, people wondered why this wasn't the case in the 1977 fires when considerable amounts of water were supplied by tankers. The community wasn't certain that this was the real reason that the fire fighting efforts had to be reduced – some residents thought that resources were simply redirected to the Yallourn mine or other fires burning in Gippsland.

Asset protection

Some members of the community are also of the opinion that fire fighters were directed to focus their efforts on protection of GDF Suez and SP Ausnet assets which were mentioned frequently in the EMT meetings. The mine fire and its impact on surrounding residents was secondary.

Reporting

There were lots of mixed messages during the Hazelwood mine fire incident including inconsistencies in the way the RCC Emergency Management Team treated information and the level of openness/direct communication depending on who was the Incident Controller at the time. Initially John Guy sought clarification of the status of the minutes of the meetings & the discussions to be assured by the Deputy Incident Controller (DIC) that the team had to be accountable and the minutes would be public documents, however it seemed that this position wasn't shared by all DICs or members of the team as subsequent comments about leaks etc & some DIC preferred a more 'close-lipped' approach to communications. The fact that the Incident Controller was based in Traralgon and relied on communication up from the ground appeared to provide a significant disconnect between the fire status reports & my observations on the ground in Morwell overlooking the mine.

Communication

Most of the communication that was disseminated to people came from the Department of Health (statements) when there was a real need for more local, targeted and direct communications (preferably from Latrobe Council) as Dr Lester's credibility had been shaken at the first public meeting & on ABC radio. Details of what was happening were scarce and even council workers didn't know what was happening. This reverberated into the community and no one seemed to know exactly what was going on, including key influencers and intermediaries.

Many decisions seemed to be announced prior to those who needed to implement them were ready to respond so that people found the advice appeared to be incorrect.

I'm sure others will report on the confusion around the issues of evacuation, support for relocation & respite all of which were far less than adequate or well understood.

Many ideas should have been 'road tested' with community members prior to announcement as they subsequently proved to be the cause of further community scepticism.

Sprinklers

As you probably know, parts of the mine no longer have sprinklers to assist with fire control which was a significant issue in fighting the fire. On windy days, because sprays are no longer available, the amount of dust and debris is sometimes unbearable, especially for people like us who live on the edge of the mine. The EPA should look into dust and debris as well as air quality around the mine.

Explain the difference

I believe that during the response, government and emergency responders should have explained to the public what made the 2014 fire so different from the 1977 fire (including why it took so long to put the fire out), this was a significant point of concern & scepticism in the community.

Suggestions

I would be grateful if the Board considered the following suggestions. In future situations like this, I suggest:

- that the local MPs, councillors and community leaders be briefed and kept up to date with situation reports and information for the community
- that community leaders be included as part of the local EMT and be given the authority to outwardly share information with the community (and not just provide information inwardly to the EMT)

Evidence

If the Board would like copies of minutes, personal notes and incident action plans from the Hazelwood Mine Incident Emergency Management Team, please let me know.

Howard Williams

Morwell 3840