

HAZELWOOD MINE FIRE INQUIRY

Submission cover sheet

Post your submission with this cover sheet to:

Submissions Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry
PO Box 3460
GIPPSLAND MC Vic 3841

Email your submission with this cover sheet to info@hazelwoodinquiry.vic.gov.au.

Title: MR	First Name: JAMES	Surname: HOWES
Organisation represented (if applicable):		
Email address:	NONE	
Postal address:	MORWELL	
Telephone:		Mobile: NON
<input 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 type="checkbox"/> Other (please state)	Response to fire by: <input type="checkbox"/> Hazelwood Coal Mine <input 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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Signature

Howes

OR if sending electronically please confirm your acknowledgment by ticking by box

Date 9-5-2014

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Signature

Howe

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Date 9-5-2014

Submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry

My name is Jim Howes. I am 81 years old and have lived in Morwell for 60 years. I am a former SEC employee, having worked at the Morwell Power Station for 20 years, as a shift worker and union official, including as the union's workcare co-ordinator.

As a resident and former SEC employee, the mine fire and the response to it, made me concerned about three things: firefighter health and working conditions; financial rebates on water usage for the clean up; and discrimination in how the financial assistance was distributed. I attended the first community meeting at the Neighbourhood House, where there were representatives from the EPA, Ambulance Victoria, and the CFA.

We were told the fire was under control and should be out in a couple of weeks, and asked if we had any questions. There were many questions because most, if not all of us, were seeking information, advice, and help. Over the next weeks I attended five of the six community meetings. All of the meetings were the same.

I also attended the large public meeting held at Kernot Hall on 12 March 2014, and I marched to Mid Valley. Speakers at the meeting were members of Voices of the Valley. I was entirely dissatisfied with this meeting. The representatives from the government were dreadful; there was no presence from the Department of Health, and it was very unfair that people from Ambulance Victoria, the CFA and the MFB were expected to address the public and their concerns. What we needed was accurate advice and information about our health concerns: an explanation of PM2 and PM 2.5; can we open our windows; can we walk down the street?

I am convinced that under no circumstances did the Chief Health Officer give the community the truth. To my knowledge the Chief Health Officer did not attend any of the public meetings. I also have concerns about the absence of local member, Russell Northe MP, who may not have attended due to concerns about jeopardising his new portfolio as Minister for Resources.

At that point I was keen to find out who was responsible for looking after the mine, and who the regulator is. I had questions that I wanted answers to:

- Annual fire inspections of vegetation and fire hazards – how many had been done?
- Rehabilitation of the mine batters – when was the last time an inspection had been carried out ?
- Given the heatwave (temperatures of 39 and 40 degrees in January and February 2014) – what had been done in respect to fire preparation?

It is my belief that nothing was done about cutting back the grass at the perimeter of the mine as a fire prevention exercise.

At the meeting on 12 March 2014, I approached a representative of the EPA and asked who has regulatory responsibility for the mine as it is clearly not the CFA or Ambulance Victoria. To her credit, the EPA representative went back to Melbourne and did in fact call me back to tell me the Department of Environment and Primary Industry is the responsible body, and gave me the phone number for the Traralgon DEPI office.

On 26 March 2014 I went to the DEPI office in Traralgon and asked the lass at the front counter if I could see the person responsible for mines, specifically Hazelwood. I was asked to wait. After I waited for a while, a staff member named [REDACTED] (apologies I don't recall his surname), and asked how many fire inspections are done per year. The person ahmed and ahhed a bit and then eventually told me five times per year. He also told me that it was no longer a DEPI responsibility, and that Worksafe Victoria was now responsible for fire inspections at the mine.

On 30 March 2014 I went to the offices of Worksafe Victoria in Traralgon. I asked to speak with the Worksafe mining inspector, but was told he wasn't there. The Worksafe office hours in Traralgon are 9am – 1pm two days per week, and 9am - 4pm one day a week.

I left, and returned the next available day the office was open, and was again told the mining inspector wasn't in. I made a total of 19 separate visits, and on each occasion that I was bale to see someone, I was told the same thing – the mining inspector wasn't in. At no point was an offer made for me to make an appointment.

At another visit in late March I was told I was in luck, that the mining inspector was in, but in a 2-hour meeting, and that he may not be available after that. At that point, and out of sheer frustration, I asked to see the manager. An acting Manager approached me and asked how he could help. I told him how frustrated and unhappy I was with the very poor response to what I thought was a fairly simple question. The acting Manager told me he would do his best to have the mining inspector call me.

A few minutes after I arrived back home, I received a call from the acting Manager to tell me the mining inspector was available to talk to me, but that he had just gone to the toilet. He did not call me back for at least another half hour or so, at which point we made arrangements for me to attend an out of office hours meeting in the Traralgon office at 2pm that day.

When I did meet with him, his response was 'Do you realise there's a mine inquiry about to start, so I won't be able to help you.' Despite his reluctance to assist me, I persevered, and the Worksafe mining inspector eventually advised me that Worksafe is not responsible for the unused parts of the mine, that that is the responsibility of DEPI. I was exceptionally unhappy with this response, so on 14 April, one month after my initial approach to the EPA representative, I approached the office of my local member, Russell Northe MP.

My question remains a relatively simple one: 'Who is responsible for the mine?'

On 17 April 2014 I met with my local member, Russell Northe MP to raise my concerns with him. He told me that he would get an answer to my question. That evening I received a phone call from a gentleman named [REDACTED] who I understand is the General Manager, Operations in Earth Resources Legislation for the Department of State Development, Business and Innovation (Traralgon). [REDACTED] advised me that neither DEPI or DSDBI are responsible for fire inspection, mine rehabilitation, vegetation or grass cutting on the perimeter of the mine (from the batters to the boundary).

[REDACTED] also advised me that [REDACTED] the Manager of the Traralgon office of DSDBI is also the mining inspector. I had wanted to speak with [REDACTED] but was told she was not available.

On 8 May 2014 I received a call from Russell Northe's office to confirm that GDF Suez is responsible for the land from the batters to the boundary fence; and that land beyond the boundary fence is the responsibility of the respective owner.

After 2 months and many attempts with various different people in various government departments, I have now given up trying to get a clear answer to my question. I still don't know who has responsibility for making sure that GDF Suez is meeting its obligations to rehabilitate the mine, clear the grass from the perimeter and conduct regular fire inspections.

I would ask the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry to look into this matter as part of its inquiry.

Howes

9-5-2014

Jim Howes

[REDACTED]
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[REDACTED]