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Online Submissions

Last Updated on Monday, 31 March 2014

Title

Mrs

First Name

Rita

Surname

Payette

Organisation represented (if applicable)

Email address

Home or office phone

Mobile

Content of submission (you can choose multiple)

- Origin and circumstances of fire
- Measures taken by Hazelwood Coal Mine to prevent fire
- Application and administration of regulatory regimes
- Response to fire by Hazelwood Coal Mine
- Response to fire by Emergency Services
- Response to fire by Public Health Officials
- Response to fire by Other Government Agencies
- Other (please state)

If Other please state here

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(tel:1300 442 972)

12th May 2014

The Board Members
Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry
Morwell, Victoria 3840

Dear Sir/Madame,

I would like to take this opportunity to retell my story. Although it is not completely linked to the inquiry, it involves the impact of the recent fire of February 9th on our property. After my brief conversation with Sonia Petering last week, she encouraged me to put my story in a letter.

Below is an article from the weekly Times of the 26th March 2014 giving a brief recount of our story.



Battlers: Morwell dairy farmers Marco and Rita Payette on their dairy farm at Driffield, were affected by the Morwell fire (inset). Picture: ANDY ROGERS

Morwell couple on the road to recovery

RITA Payette will never forget February 9.

The Driffield dairy farmer still gets choked-up talking about it.

"Two hundred acres (80ha) was completely burnt of our 300-acre (121ha) property," she said.

"The fire was lit deliberately in the next door property.

"It took 480 bales of silage, all our fencing, but we saved our stock.

"My husband put his life in danger to save the stock, but that's what dairy farmers do."

The fire came to be known as the Hazelwood Mine Fire and was only extinguished a fortnight ago.

"Heartbroken" last week Rita and Marco completed the last of their re-sowing. Since the day their 300-cow dairy farm was blackened they haven't stopped working.

"We were milking at 5am to get more out of the day since the fire," she said.

As the only farm affected by the blaze, the other property was a farm they leased, Rita made countless calls for assistance and filled-in endless streams of paperwork.

The couple initially received the \$2000 grant from the Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund and have applied for a \$10,000 business grant.

Rita said they were grateful for the financial assistance, but the costs of agistment and purchasing "good quality" milking hay add up as well as the new fencing and re-sowing of pastures. "We are victims of this whole thing. I had to keep fighting, but today I stand strong.

"I don't wish this for anyone."

Rita and Marco received assistance from farm consultant John Mulvany and GippsDairy in the week following the fire, while the shire provided volunteers helped re-fence the property. "I hope (this story) is encouragement for dairy farmers who have gone through a similar thing. If I can tell dairy farmers something, it is to never give up," Rita said.

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My purpose of writing to you is to actually voice out how strenuous and heartbreaking this unfortunate event has been for us. From the first day of the fires, we have worked for more than 12 hours a day to get things back in order. We worked in all that smoke and ash and had no government assistance. It needs to be mentioned that I initiated the call to the shire after three days into the impact as we had absolutely no one come to visit us. In this already desperate situation, I have felt that I needed to use my energy not only to do the manual labour of cleaning up and routine farm jobs but to constantly beg for assistance. It was obvious to everyone that the concentration was solely on the mine fire and the impact on the town of Morwell. What was happening to our business seemed of absolutely no concern to any of the departments that I called. Nothing was immediately available when we needed it most (only 3 to 4 weeks after there was a government loan offered). After a few emails and constant phone calls, we had volunteers initiated by the shire to help with the boundary fencing. At one point, I was even told that the Shire would help get the fencing materials for us but that never happened.

The grant that we applied from VECCI (as mentioned in the article above) has been rejected only due to us 'not being in the township of Morwell". VECCI was supplied with full documentation and cash flow projections to show the impact, and I can only request that our circumstance be looked upon further as we suffered loss to 2/3 of our property. Up to this present moment we are not able to bring back all our cattle back, as the grass has not grown adequately. The impact for us in more in the long run hence at this point we have applied for the government loan.

I believe that even as a minority we still have the right to the same assistance as other bushfire affected properties in the past and I am looking forward to a favourable reply.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Yours sincerely,

Rita Payette

[REDACTED]
Driffield Vic 3840
[REDACTED]