

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.

ACU/GAARDS

Title: Mrs.	First Name: Vicki	Surname: HAMILTON
Organisation represented (if applicable): ASBESTOS Council of VICTORIA/GIPPSLAND ASBESTOS Related DISEASES SUPPORT INC.		
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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 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

Vicki Hamilton

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

Date 9/5/2014,



Asbestos Council of Victoria

8th May 2014

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To Whom it May Concern

A brief overview of our organisation for your understanding

The ACV/GARDS organisation was established in 1991 incorporated in 2001 and received ATO DGR status in 2002. ACV/GARDS supports asbestos sufferers, their families and the wider community no matter where they come from. We work with government departments, local government, unions and other organisations to raise awareness and educate the community on the risks associated with exposure to asbestos. We advocate on behalf of and support asbestos sufferers, their families and the wider community. We have a membership base of 200+ and strive to support our families by loaning free of charge medical equipment such as home oxygen concentrators, conserving devices, nebulisers, wheel chairs, shower chairs etc - anything that makes life comfortable. We also provide a support group once a month and excursions for members. We have 7 times the state average for mesothelioma in Latrobe Valley/Gippsland.

The Hazelwood Mine Fire

We believe it has been a disaster at all stages (pre-fire, during the fire, post-fire cleanup, etc.) and at all levels (response of the company, local government, state government, etc.). The only major 'bright sparks' identified by our group was the hard work of the fire fighters, SES and Red Cross, communication by ABC and local community initiatives.

1. Pre-fire--concerns:

- Why hadn't remediation of the mine taken place to reduce the risk of fire.
- Why had fire fighting equipment been removed from Hazelwood mine?
- There is a long history of fires in the LV's open cuts during the hot summer months.
Why were recommendations from earlier inquiries into open cut fires and how to mitigate these fire risks not implemented? (it does not

give the local community much hope for different results from this inquiry).

- The fire appears to be systematic of a major bigger problem in which the mines have been poorly managed by private owners and regulated by government...the collapse of the Latrobe river at Yallourn, the collapse of the Princess highway in Morwell, the collapse of the Morwell River Diversion almost as soon as it was completed, the holes that appeared under the railway line right next to the Yallourn mine etc. Appears to be a much bigger problem associated with privatisation and how it was negotiated which remain largely secret to this day---i.e. who owns the mine? We believe the mine is owned by the Victorian State Government and perhaps managed by private enterprise but this has never been public knowledge.

2. During the fire--concerns from our members were raised about:

- Poor communication with local community
- Not knowing how toxic the fumes were
- Not knowing how far the toxins have travelled and how to define affected community' with regards to health.
- No confidence in the Health Dept or the representative "Health Officer" when the Health Officer continually kept saying right up till the last weeks of the mine fire "They were treating this like any other bushfire" another statement that was repeated over and over was "There will be no long term health effects"
- Air monitoring did not take place until quite late.
- Disregard by Health Minister and others about the severity of the health situation - Health Officer kept saying they were taking advice - who from?
- Considerable stress and mental health issues associated with the fire also largely ignored (ongoing problem to this day).
- Health Dept finally in the last weeks saying that people need to relocate if they can and offering monetary assistance late on a Friday afternoon and then Centrelink being closed for the weekend when an emergency was finally declared. Poor organisation and clearly no understanding of what situation they had created.
- Some community members were made to feel guilty for accepting monetary assistance in relocating thus they did not return for subsequent payments and tried to manage without it. There were

many inconsistencies with payments for relocation even with those family members who were living under the same roof.

- Lack of resources locally available to fight the fire
- Why is a volunteer fire fighting force being expected to fight a fire for a multinational corporation's assets particularly when they have not been appropriately trained to fight coal fires?
- Why wasn't the State Government (if they own the mine) calling on local knowledge of coal fires? The expertise was in our community and not consulted.
- Should GDF Suez have been able to operate the mine whilst it was on fire and put more lives at risk for the sake of the power/money? We know that WorkSafe were monitoring the fire fighters but was anyone monitoring the workers who were operating machinery in the mine to keep the fuel up for the power?

3. The cleanup-- concerns were raised about:

- The risk to householders and unskilled workers employed to do the cleanup work
- Not being nearly extensive enough--what about roof batts, cooling units, solar panels etc. Who is paying for this? Residents? It should be the State Government or GDF Suez
- The cost is being placed upon households to do much of the cleanup. We feel that community should be very aggrieved about this situation - it was not the communities burden to do the clean up.
- The "bucket" with goodies in it was pathetically inadequate for the monumental clean up that had to take place in people's homes and yards. It was also mentioned that the products supplied ie. masks were not explained to which mask was for what job. The gloves that were provided had sizes on them but they were just given out indiscriminately regardless of the size of the hands that were doing the job.
- Local communities being caught in the middle of 'buck passing' between company, insurers, State & Local governments.
- Incorrect advice being given to householders re: clean up - use of high pressure hoses encouraged in the first instance - this was diverted by our organisation getting on ABC radio to inform listeners of the dangers of high pressure hoses and asbestos. We also informed listeners not to get up on roofs to clean solar panels - very dangerous - after the pink batts scandal we would have thought that no

government would have been encouraging anyone to get on a roof or in a roof.

- How do people know it is safe for them to return to their homes, schools, nursing homes---no assessment of toxins within buildings before and after cleanup. Bare necessity clean up was only offered to the frail and disabled. Why was only one aged care facility offered free monitoring/checking before they were able to bring back residents? This was not on offer to the entire community.
- With exception of inquiry process (which is not about providing immediate assistance to impacted communities), there appears to be an ongoing lack of interest in local community concerns related to personal health including mental health, personal financial costs associated with cleanup, etc.
- Payments were only offered to concession card holders and differing amounts were offered depending on where you lived from the mine.
- Payments were only available if you came back to get them in Morwell - some of our members left as soon as the fire started but had to come back to receive payments
- Members saw street sweepers sweeping the road and kicking up dust - the members then complained that this was making the situation worse for breathing so local council came along with water spraying equipment to try and wash away the ash. This then made another problem because it splashed the ash and mud onto buildings that were not far from the road edge, then shop owners and residents had to go out and clean up the mud.
- Excessive amounts of water were used by all in Morwell on a regular day to day basis to clean ash and mess from their homes.

4. Longer term--concerns were raised about:

- The risks of fire in the mines continuing if proper remediation of the mines does not occur (the mines are only getting bigger with the amount of exposed coal increasing daily).
- Will responsibility, regulation and oversight of the mine become clearer/better into the future? -- I think not! - we have not learnt by our mistakes to this day. There are quite a few enquiries/reports that have been done dating back to the Forties and the recommendations from these reports were not heeded.

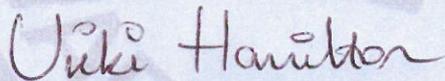
Issues we feel that need to be addressed:

1. There should be a moratorium on all housing subdivision within a 5km radius of any mine until such time as a complete risk assessment is carried out and recommendations made on safe distance for building and perceived personal risk.
2. If this risk assessment finds that any residences are too close to the mine these homes should be repurchased at fair market value and a relocation subsidy paid to the owners of these premises by the State Government ensuring that there is no cost to the owner.
3. The International companies that are managing our mines should be fined for any mismanagement of said mines and be directly liable for any costs to remunerate for damage associated with the mine - this includes the local community and also liable for any life lost due to mismanagement.
4. There should be proper emergency action plans put in place for these very issues that have been identified for decades that still are not in place.
5. There should be the correct equipment and infrastructure in place to negate any foreseeable disasters as they occur. A properly trained personnel to fight these fires.
6. There should be a memorandum of understanding between the emergency services and the mine operators so that we do not have a repeat of waiting 90 mins to get permission to fight the fire that has travelled through a barrier fence at the mine.
7. Members want water rates for one term of their billing cycle compensated/credited for water charges incurred during and after cleaning up ash etc .
8. A complete health study of residents for at least the next 10 years or more
9. On the cleanup of ash and dust in the streets of Morwell - why wasn't an Environmental Services firm engaged to bring industrial trucks into Morwell and vacuum up the ash instead of sweeping and hosing?
10. All residents in Morwell should have their air conditioning units cleaned, roof cavities, solar panels, heating units by professionals and these all represent personal risks to the community if they are contaminated with ash. This expense should be paid by the State Government or the Mine operator.

11. We wish to make mention that ash from the mine fire will be in roof cavities (some more than others) this ash could be sitting on old style down lights in roofs and could present a fire hazard anytime.
12. Consideration should've been given to reimbursing people for carpets and drape cleaning etc.
13. There was a lack of coverage of the Mine Fire on national media - in fact there was no coverage for weeks on the mine fire. Why was this? Residents looked to the metro/national TV media to give them information. Metro/National media gave constant updates on fires that were taking place around Kilmore at the time of the Mine Fire - very inconstant reporting on very serious situations. There should have been more info to residents of Morwell and surrounds on the Mine Fire.
14. Message texting service after the Mine Fire commenced was clearly inadequate - The Home Expo was taking place in Morwell at Kernot Hall where hundreds of people had gathered and no one - not even a text message was given to warn the stall holders and customers that the fire had got into the mine and the highway was in imminent danger closing. Thus cutting off peoples retreat in that direction.

These are our observations and recommendations after talking with our members who were a part of the Morwell and district community.

Yours sincerely



Vicki Hamilton OAM
CEO/Secretary



Asbestos Council of Victoria

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14th May 2014

Peter Rozen & Laura Fitzpatrick
SUBMISSION HAZELWOOD MINE FIRE ENQUIRY
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Supplement to our submission

Dear Peter & Laura

We would like to add (albeit a day or two late) to our submission just a note on thoughts from our members who experienced this dreadful Mine Fire - some comments in layman's terms on the Fly Ash experienced during the 8 weeks of these fires.

We know that there was a significant amount of Fly Ash during the 8 weeks which was breathed in, it lay in peoples gardens (on veggie patches) and in water catchment such as tank water and settled on almost anything that was out in the open air. Members complained of plants that were scarred, car duco that seemed to be marked etc.

The advice on the Victorian EPA web site and anything they were giving to the general public was the same advice as the Department of Human Services that the levels of chemicals detected in smoke from the Hazelwood Mine fire were at acceptable levels to human health. There was no levels given on either the Dept of Human Services web site or printed material nor was there on the EPA web site or printed material. The general public were to just "take their word for it". The general public wanted and expected to find the details of levels of all pollutants from these depts but the depts neglected to give these levels out. The general public had a right to make up their own mind about detectable levels.

As you are probably already aware from other submissions more knowledgeable than ours that you have received about Fly Ash - this contains PAH'S (Polynuclear Aromatic Hydrocarbons) SPECIAL PRECAUTIONS are given to these PAH's: Treat all Polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons as carcinogens. It is considered toxic waste.

This carcinogen was being burnt unadulterated from the mine.

A description of "What is coal ash?" Coal ash is the waste that is left after coal is combusted (burned). It includes fly ash (fine powdery particles that are carried up the smoke stack and captured by pollution control devices)- this of course was not the case with the mine fire, as well as coarser materials

that fall to the bottom of the furnace. Most coal ash comes from coal-fired electric power plants. Why is it dangerous? Depending on where the coal was mined, coal ash typically contains heavy metals including arsenic, lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium and selenium, as well as aluminium, antimony, barium, beryllium, boron, chlorine, cobalt, manganese, molybdenum, nickel, thallium, vanadium, and zinc.

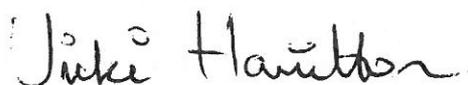
How dangerous is coal ash to humans? The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of America has found that living next to a coal ash disposal site can increase your risk of cancer or other diseases. If you live near an unlined wet ash pond (surface impoundment) and you get your drinking water from a well, you may have as much as a 1 in 50 chance of getting cancer from drinking arsenic-contaminated water. **If eaten, drunk or inhaled**, these toxicants can cause cancer and nervous system impacts such as cognitive deficits, developmental delays and behavioural problems. They can also cause heart damage, lung disease, respiratory distress, kidney disease, reproductive problems, gastrointestinal illness, birth defects, and impaired bone growth in children.

Is coal ash a big problem? Arsenic is one of the most common, and most dangerous, pollutants from coal ash.

ACV/GARDS believes that all of these toxic metals are cancer causing and we believe that the people of Morwell breathed in all of these carcinogens for 8 weeks. No one in charge of the public health talked about any of this.

We hope that you will take a good long look at this issue that we have brought to your attention from our members.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vicki Hamilton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Vicki Hamilton OAM
CEO/Secretary