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MORWELL FIRES – GUIDELINES FOR THE PAYMENT OF PERSONAL HARDSHIP VOLUNTARY RELOCATION PAYMENTS – 28 FEBRUARY 2014

BACKGROUND

Since January and February 2014, multiple fires have been burning in the Gippsland area impacting on residents.

The Morwell Hazelwood open-cut mine fire that commenced on the 9 February 2014 is of particular concern because of the number of complexities and issues centred on fire response issues, messaging to the community, air quality issues and health and community impacts.

As a result of potential health and ongoing environmental impacts on residents in the immediate vicinity of the fire the Chief Health Officer has determined (on a precautionary basis) the need to recommend to vulnerable people in the community to relocate. It is not a mandatory direction. The recommendation arises in response to concerns for the health and welfare of vulnerable people.

Advice from the Environment Protection Agency indicates that upon certain wind conditions high levels of particulates are being detected immediately north of the mine, specifically the southern parts of Morwell. Monitoring stations north of the railway line indicate lower levels of particulates. Hence the Chief Health Officer has concluded the need to address the health and welfare of persons living in the affected area.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

DEFINITION OF VULNERABILITY

The Chief Health Officer considers individuals with respiratory or coronary disease, pregnant women, preschool children and older persons should consider relocating until such time the Chief Health Officer considers it safe to return.

In response to the Chief Health Officer's recommendation affected residents will be deemed eligible to apply for personal assistance grants on the basis of hardship.

COMMONWEALTH ASSISTANCE

Advice from the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance (DTF) states that in terms of emergency relief assistance grant activation, that these grants are already activated and were announced for the February 2014 Bushfires for the local government area of Latrobe. The Commonwealth agrees the costs associated with this action are eligible for reimbursement on a 50:50 basis under Category A.

In addition, the Commonwealth agrees that costs associated with further assistance, known as 'Personal hardship voluntary relocation payments', are also eligible for reimbursement on a 50:50 basis. These grants come under Category D under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) on the basis that they relate to circumstances that are unique and exceptional.

ELIGIBILITY

Personal hardship voluntary relocation payments are provided to alleviate personal hardship arising from the effects of an emergency by helping to meet immediate essential health, safety and well-being needs of impacted individuals/households.

Costs will include coverage for needs such as transport, accommodation, medical care and other personal expenses.



HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

The criteria for affected residents to be eligible for personal hardship voluntary relocation payments are:

- hardship experienced by the continuing emissions from the fire,
- proof of address within the affected area as primary place of residence,
- proof of low-income e.g. pension or benefit,
- need to relocate because of assessed vulnerability.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

The amount of the personal hardship relocation payment will be assessed on a case by case basis and expected to be in the order of \$1,250 per week per household or \$750 per single person household, until such time the Chief Health Officer considers it safe to return.