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Environmental Health Standing Committee (enHealth) Morwell Coalmine Fire Teleconference

Outcomes

18:00 (AEDT) 27 February 2014

1. Opening Remarks (Chair)

The Chair, Mr Graeme Gillespie, welcomed attendees to the teleconference.

Attendees

Dr Rosemary Lester	Victoria
Mr Graeme Gillespie	Victoria
Ms Sandra Falconer	Victoria
Ms Sita Balshaw	Victoria
Mr Rob McKenzie	Victoria
Mr Danny Csutoros	Victoria
Ms Jane Canestra	Victoria
Dr Monika Nitschke	South Australia
Mr Adam Capon	New South Wales
Dr Richard Broome	New South Wales
Mr Clive Paige	Queensland
Mr Will Miller	Commonwealth Department of Health
Ms Mandy Charlton	Commonwealth Department of Health
Ms Liz Cheah	Secretariat

2. Situation Update:

- On 9 February 2014, a fire at the Hazelwood brown coal mine in the Latrobe Valley commenced. Smoke and ash from the fires have been impacting the town of Morwell for approximately 3 weeks. There has been significant community concern regarding the long-term health impacts from exposure to particulate matter (PM) and carbon monoxide.
- The Victorian Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) has placed air quality monitoring equipment in Morwell to monitor air quality levels. Data from these monitors has indicated significant levels of PM2.5 in South Morwell.
- The Victoria Department of Health has developed a draft PM2.5 response protocol ([Attachment A](#)) incorporating a tiered approach to guide decision-making to minimise adverse health effects during this situation. Comments were also sought on supplementary documents, the long-term health effects Q&D and draft relocation advice ([Attachment B and C](#)).

3. Execution

- Members discussed the details of the protocol, and emphasised the difference between use of 'evacuation' and 'relocation', noting that the draft protocol refers to voluntary relocation.
 - Members expressed concern that relocating sensitive groups could set an inappropriate precedent, however noted the draft protocol is an addendum specific to this incident.
 - Members discussed sensitive groups as including children, the elderly, pregnant women, and people with existing health conditions. Members discussed the age bracket for children, noting that early primary school aged children were at a more vulnerable stage of development. Members noted that some school children had already been relocated from schools in South Morwell to schools in areas less affected by smoke.
 - Members also discussed the level of risk for pregnant women, and suggested that traditional definitions of short and long term exposure could not be easily applied to pregnancy. Members suggested revising information in the Q&A document to more accurately describe the level of risk for pregnant women.
 - Members noted that individuals with existing health conditions and children should be discouraged from exacerbating symptoms with physical activity.
 - Members noted the tiered approach in the draft protocol is an appropriate way to respond to a developing situation.
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4. Risk Management

- The Victorian Department of Health and other involved agencies are seeking to provide accurate, realistic and pragmatic information to the community to assist with decisions regarding health outcomes and levels of risk during a situation with no foreseeable end date.

5. Next steps

- Members agreed to provide comments and feedback on the protocol and associated documents to Victoria Department of Health by 10:00 Friday 28 February 2014.

Attachments

Attachment A	Draft PM2.5 response protocol
Attachment B	Long-term health effects Q&A
Attachment C	Draft relocation advice