

Report Following Consultation Between Communication Experts Professor Jim Macnamara and Mr Lachlan Drummond

In the Expert Witness Concurrent Evidence Protocol provided to Professor Jim Macnamara and Mr Lachlan Drummond on 2 June 2014, the parties were asked to meet to discuss their respective views on public communication during the Hazelwood coal mine fire crisis, to identify points on which they agree and/or disagree and discuss what actions should be taken. In addition, the parties were requested to provide a short report responding to the following three questions:

- a) *Do you consider that the Government Departments engaged appropriate communication strategies during the fire? Please provide your reasons.*

The answer to this question has to be 'yes and no'. Although Government Departments and authorities issued a considerable amount of information, not all was *appropriate* and much of it was not *timely* enough, as noted in the following. Some of the more appropriate communication included:

- The CFA helped arranged and attended public meetings from an early stage of the crisis and issued a large amount of information. Overall, the CFA was highly visible during the crisis, which is to be expected in the case of bushfires leading to a mine fire;
- The EPA issued regular smoke alerts starting soon after the fire began;
- The Chief Health Officer issued statements and updates throughout the crisis;
- In total, the Victorian Government claims that 151 advice and warning messages were issued. There is no reason to dispute this, but it is believed that most were issued online (see comments later about online versus offline communication);
- Evidence submitted by the Victorian Government, the Fire Services Commissioner, Craig Lapsley, and the State Recovery Coordinator, Alan Hall indicates that, in addition to online communication, public communication included paid *newspaper advertisements*, paid *radio advertising*, a *twice-weekly newsletter* that was letterbox dropped to all Morwell properties, *media release*, *press conferences* and *media interviews*;
- Government departments organised to produce a Latrobe Valley Coal Mine Community Information and Engagement Plan (through the Emergency Management Joint Public Information Committee – EMJPIC) and later circulated a Recovery Community Engagement and Communications Plan;
- A Media Officer was deployed to Hazelwood, although later redeployed to Traralgon.

On the other hand, there were many public communication issues, including:

- **Distribution and reach:** As pointed out in Professor Macnamara's detailed report, a large proportion of public communication was distributed via the internet (Web sites) and a considerable amount of communication utilised social media. While commending online communication as an increasingly important channel, the principles of best practice crisis communication, and the principles that guide communication of the Victorian Government according to its submission, include provision of "consistent information in a timely, tailored, relevant and *accessible* manner" (p. 73).
- **Timing and tailoring:** The date of producing and distributing documents indicates that much information was not timely, nor was the information sufficiently tailored or accessible. For example, the timing of the announcement of the evacuation of vulnerable people was problematic for those concerned. This occurred on the afternoon of Friday 28 February late in the day and immediately before a weekend. Given that the situation had not changed, the date and timing seemed arbitrary and could have been made earlier in the day or week.

- **Poor fit with community profile:** As noted in Mr Drummond’s report, public communication failed to adequately recognise and account for the socio-economic status and demographic profile of the community to which they were aimed. Communication also illustrated a lack of understanding of the community.
- **Disconnect:** There was a disconnect between the direct, personal experiences of the affected communities (ill-health, ash contamination, anxiety, concern) and the communication issued by the Department of Health and the EPA, which appeared to downplay and not adequately address community concerns. This led community members to distrust the advice and communication being issued.
- **Not aimed at the right level:** Much of the information was quite technical and residents reported difficulty in understanding what they were being told. This is a considerable challenge for authorities such as those involved in this crisis, but one which must be addressed. In addition, some messages were overly simple, repetitive, and uninformative such as smoke advisories.
- **Lack of a communication plan:** The Latrobe Valley Coal Mine Community Information and Engagement Plan appears to have been finalised and distributed on or around 24 February 2014 – 15 days after the coal mine fire broke out.
- **One-way communication:** The National Principles for Disaster Recovery state that communication with a community should be *two-way* and that input and feedback should be sought and considered over an extended period, as acknowledged in the Victorian Government submission, however there appeared to be minimal two-way communication with the local community.
- **Other communication problems:** In addition, both reports identify further issues with Government communication including incorrect and inconsistent information, alarming messages, a lack of information and inability to get answers.

b) *Do you consider that GDF Suez engaged appropriate communication strategies during the fire? Please provide your reasons.*

No. As noted in both reports, the company did not attend public meetings during the crisis and made very few statements. **The company was largely invisible. This is contrary to best practice crisis communication which advocates open, engaged communication.** While not directly at fault in causing the fire, the mine company omitted to make any statements of sympathy, concern or support for the Morwell community – in simple terms, the human touch was missing from its crisis management strategy.

It is noted that GDF SUEZ launched a ‘Revive Morwell’ program as part of the recovery phase involving a cash contribution of \$100 to each household in Morwell to spend at local businesses. However, this was announced on 22 May 2014, several months after the fire and emergency operations.

NOTE: While noting that GDF Suez public communication was deficient in the context of a crisis involving its facilities, both Mr Drummond and Professor Macnamara argue that Government Departments and authorities have a greater responsibility for public communication in relation to citizens’ health, safety and welfare. The failures in this regard are therefore priorities for consideration.

c) *What steps, if any, do you consider could have been taken to improve the communication strategy of any/all parties during the fire?*

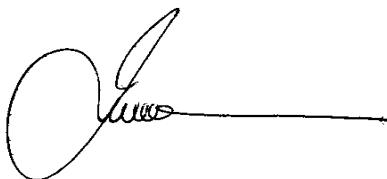
Professor Macnamara has recommended, and Mr Drummond agreed with the following:

- A review by GDF SUEZ Australian Energy of its crisis management and crisis communication strategy in line with international best practice;
- A review by Victorian government departments and authorities of the findings of this inquiry and revision of procedures to ensure **speedier public communication** in emergencies and crises;
- As part of the above revision, relevant government authorities should undertake **training in crisis communication** that addresses the human relations and affective dimension as well as physical health and safety;
- Give consideration to the appointment of trained **community relations specialists** for deploying into impacted communities to provide counsel, engage with the community, and translate technical and operational information into 'layperson' terms;
- Latrobe City Council should build a **working relationship with Voices of the Valley** and support continuation of the group as a voice for the community and as a mechanism for self-help and community agency. This can facilitate a participatory approach, rather than top-down communication.

Mr Drummond has recommended and Professor Macnamara agrees with the following:

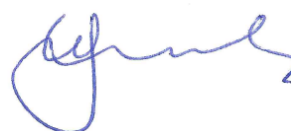
- **Crisis communication with an affected community such as Morwell must take into account the social and demographic characteristics of the audience and tailor information to the community.** This includes using trusted spokespersons with local knowledge;
- **Facilitate two-way communication through the establishment of a community advocate group during a crisis,** or working with an existing representative group;
- **Ensure that communication is simple, meaningful, uses plain language and avoids jargon and acronyms that can confuse.** Pay particular attention to tone and style to 'speak the language' of the audience;
- **For an affected community like Morwell it is important to use multiple channels, early in the crisis, to access hard-to-reach reach audiences.** This includes more traditional methods such as **printed leaflets, community meetings and door-knocking;**
- **Best Practice models:** Lessons from the crisis communication literature summarised in Professor Macnamara's report and the literature on Chronic Technological Disasters should be examined as a model for the development of response frameworks that better fit the nature of the Hazelwood Mine Fire and possible future events like it. This event could be better characterised as an industrial accident leading to a longer-term community health crisis and therefore needed procedures, protocols and communication models that related directly to that type of event applied to a regional area.

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3 June 2014

Mr Lachlan Drummond



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3 June 2014