

## WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANTHONY LALOR

I, Anthony Lalor, of Willow Grove, Victoria, state as follows:

### Personal background

1. I live with my family on a dairy farm at Willow Grove, north of Trafalgar.
2. I have been a dairy farmer for 25 years. Before that I worked for the State Electricity Commission of Victoria as a surveyor for about 12 years.
3. I have made a submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry. Attached to my statement and entitled annexure "AL-1" is my submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry.

### Country Fire Authority

4. I have been a volunteer member of the Country Fire Authority for over 25 years. During that time I have been a member of the Willow Grove Brigade, which is part of the Narracan Group within District 9, Gippsland Area.
5. I am currently the First Lieutenant and Secretary of the Willow Grove Brigade.
6. I was involved in fighting the 2008 fire at the Hazelwood Mine, and I am familiar with the mine from my time working with the SECV. Other than that I have not had any specific brown coal fire fighting training, and have not participated in any training exercises at any of the open cut coal mines.

### My experience with the Hazelwood Mine Fire

7. The Willow Grove Brigade was called out to respond to the Hernes Oak fire on 7 February 2014. I did not turn out that day, however.
8. On 9 February 2014, I was called out by the CFA to fight a fire at Jindivick. After I returned to the station, there was a call out for crews to man up strike team number 9081 to fight the fire around Morwell. I put my name forward for the strike team.
9. I went home and did a few jobs on the farm, before receiving a page to assemble at Morwell fire station at 6.00 pm.
10. On arriving at Morwell fire station, we were originally told that we would be deployed to Tyers. Before we left, a call came through that the Morwell briquette factory was under attack and so we were re-deployed to defend this asset.

11. Strike team number 9081 consisted of 5 tankers and a strike team leader's vehicle which was a 4-wheel drive. A Morwell tanker was the lead vehicle. The other tankers came from Erica (which is in the same group as Willow Grove), and Hallora, Trida and Tarwin Lower. The strike team leader was the Willow Grove Captain, Andrew Balfour.
12. We arrived at the Morwell briquette factory to find no actual fire in the vicinity of the factory, just a large amount of smoke. The Morwell tanker was assigned elsewhere and the remaining tankers were redeployed to the eastern batters of the mine to defend a fire that was threatening buildings and infrastructure directly adjacent to these batters.
13. Our radio system was not compatible with the Hazelwood mine's system so we had no radio contact. We could only communicate with the ICC.
14. We arrived at a locked gate on the north eastern corner of the mine, which we were told had a key pad entry system. On arrival we found that it did not have a key pad entry system. The next message we received from the Incident Control Centre was that it was remote controlled and that it would be opened remotely by the Hazelwood mine control centre.
15. All our fire trucks carry bolt cutters, but the size of the security fence made it impossible for us to cut through the fence. Additionally, the lock itself was very heavy duty so it was not possible to cut through this either. Consequently we had to wait until someone opened the gate. This was very frustrating as we could see the fire and time was ticking. We waited at the gate for at least 15-20 minutes before deciding to try another entrance as the gate had not been opened by the mine control centre.
16. Relying on my local knowledge of the area from when I had been a surveyor with the SECV, I directed the strike team to another gate which was also locked. This gate was also apparently remotely controlled by the mine control centre. The strike team leader was communicating with the ICC who was relaying information to the mine.
17. This gate was finally opened for us, but rather than leaving it open so that all the vehicles could get access at once, it had to be opened and shut for each individual vehicle that passed through. This slowed us down further. I understand that this was rectified later.
18. Although we had taken some time to enter the mine, we were not met by anyone from the Hazelwood mine. When I worked as a surveyor at the mine, mine personnel would be called in to act as scouts when there was an incident in the mine. There was no scout provided to us in this instance.

19. I could not see any appropriate signage to guide us to the area above the eastern batters once we were in the mine.
20. We headed towards the rising conveyor that services the Morwell briquette factory. Fire was coming over this conveyor and onto the grass area. We started protecting this conveyor, but our efforts were hampered by security fencing around this structure.
21. At this point, a couple of men who I believe worked at the Briquette factory wandered, quite casually, down towards us. They informed us that the conveyor was a crucial asset that needed to be protected.
22. Whilst we were defending this rising conveyor, there was no evidence of any operational water sprays on the conveyer. At the time, I found it very surprising that there was no operational fire suppression.. Later in the evening, when the immediate threat had passed, I was very surprised to see that the fire protection sprays were operating within the conveyor structure. I assumed at that point that the fire suppression equipment had been affected by the loss of power and I was surprised that it did not have any back-up power.
23. At one stage while we were defending the rising conveyor to the briquette factory, a representative who I believe was from the briquette factory requested access down the road where we were fighting fires so that he could continue carting coal to the briquette factory in order to maintain production.
24. Whilst fighting the fires on the area above the eastern batters, fire was coming out of the batters and spotting into the grass. It was moving towards the buildings located on the ridge. To suppress this fire we required water, and the tankers were nearly empty. A mine representative turned up and informed us that there weren't really any water points in the vicinity so we were sent up to one of the pondages located back towards the power station but found that there was no water access there. We were then sent to another set of hydrants closer to the Hazelwood power station for water access. We were wasting important time in our search for water and this was very frustrating.
25. We confined our fire fighting to the grass levels on the top of the mine, concentrating on asset protection and stopping the fire from spreading in the grassland on the eastern edge. Our expertise was above ground and I knew that we would be able to achieve something if we focused on protecting those assets.

26. At one point I went and looked over the edge into the mine, I was surprised at how massive the fire was. It was unbelievable, it was like vertical lava flow but rather than flowing down it was flowing up and over the top of the cut. I commented to one of the other fire fighters that this fire would take at least a month to put out. I knew that there was absolutely nothing that we could do in the cut, it would be like throwing a cup of water on a camp fire.
27. Throughout the night, water was our main concern, both in terms of the location and flows that were available. We were unable to draft from some of the pondage because of the risk of contamination. A number of the hydrants that we encountered didn't have CFA threads so we were unable to connect our hoses. It would not have been an issue if there had been hoses attached to the hydrants, because we could have used these to refill, but there were no hoses. This was unexpected as normally it is a requirement for properties in bushfire prone areas to have CFA thread points. I felt that mine personnel that we encountered struggled to understand our need for high volume water sources and this further hampered our fire fighting efforts.
28. There was a water point on the top of the batter but it was only a two inch pipe coming out of the ground. It took a very long time to fill a tanker, so we staggered the refill times so that there was always someone with water working on the fire.
29. We were getting our direction from the strike team leader who was communicating with the incident controller.
30. At some point during the night our strike team was re-tasked to the area above the northern batters because the fire was coming out of the cut and heading north to the highway. We were tasked to protect the high voltage cables which are located to the north of the mine. We were escorted by two mine workers to this area.
31. Access to this section of the mine was woeful. The access track was deeply rutted and it seemed to me that it had not been graded since the winter. There clearly had been no track maintenance done in advance of the bushfire season.
32. By the time we got there, some of the power poles were already burnt out but we tried to save what we could. Conditions were fairly severe. There was a lot of vegetation that hadn't been maintained or cleared and there were old conveyor line gullets in the ground that were quite hazardous. There was also a lot of smoke and a burning rubber type smell. It was very different to the smells I would usually associate with a bushfire.

33. It seemed clear to me that no suppression of the fire was taking place in the cut as we were under a constant ember attack in this position. There was no evidence of sprays or anything in operation.
34. I did see one old Hazelwood fire tanker driving around, but this was the only evidence that I saw of any fire suppression on the part of the mine.
35. We worked the north-east corner of the mine for the whole night. I felt that we achieved a lot during the night especially in the ridge area where there were a lot of buildings. If we hadn't been there, there would have been major asset losses and the fire would have spread .
36. At one point two tankers, I'm not sure from which brigades, were escorted by GDF Suez personnel to go into the cut to protect a pump station.
37. We were released at approximately 7.00 am the next morning. Conditions had abated by that stage, the winds had died down and there were no longer ember attacks out of the cut. We conducted a handover with the relief crews and left the mine.
38. During the night I was not made aware of any issues with carbon monoxide. I didn't recall this being a concern during the 2008 fire so was not really conscious that it would be an issue. The next day I did have a headache but this could just as likely have been caused by the fact that I had been fighting a fire all night and was exhausted.
39. I'm reluctant to assist with future fires in the cut because I think the CFA volunteers are used by the mine as a cheap form of fire crew. During the 2008 fire in the mine, the CFA volunteers stayed on site at the mine and fought the fire throughout the night whilst the mine personnel knocked off at midnight and went home.
40. There were calls for crews to come back to the mine after 9 February 2014 but I chose not to respond as I felt that I had done my part.

ANTHONY LALOR