

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SIMON ELLIS

I, Simon Ellis, of [REDACTED], Morwell, Victoria, state as follows:

Personal background

1. I currently reside at [REDACTED], Morwell.
2. I live with my brother and my 7 year old daughter.
3. I have lived in Morwell since February 2013. I moved here from Melton to run a hotel, which I have since sold..
4. I currently work as a security guard and own a small business, WOW Entertainment, which provides lighting and sound equipment for events.
5. I have provided a submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry. Attached to my statement and entitled "SE-1" is my submission to the Inquiry.

My experience with the Hazelwood Mine Fire

6. At approximately 1.00pm on 9 February 2014 I was with my brother on the veranda of my house when we noticed a plume of smoke appear above the tree line in a south-west direction.
7. At 1.03pm I called 000 to report the fire.
8. The fire appeared to be on the hill on the west side of the Strzelecki Highway. It did not seem to be part of the fire that had been burning on the previous day at Hemes Oak. Approximately 1 hour after first seeing the fire, smoke appeared to be covering the whole town of Morwell.
9. At approximately 3.00pm my brother and I went for a drive around town and to stock up on supplies in case we became stuck in the house. I spoke to a CFA person stationed at the end of my street and was told to stay in my house because there were plenty of fire fighters and equipment and that they were there to protect assets.
10. At 3.44pm I received the following text message on my phone "*Bushfire Emergency Warning from CFA Hazelwood, Yinnar, Driffield, and surrounding areas. Seek shelter now check local radio or cfa.vic.gov.au*".
11. Once it became dark I could see the extent of the fire as the whole horizon was glowing red. I could clearly see that the mine was on fire.

12. I had the ABC radio on in the background and heard an interview with GDF spokesperson Trevor Rowe. He said words to the effect that everything was fine, the fire was not in the mine and the power station had not been affected.
13. At some stage during the evening I heard and saw 4 explosions simultaneously come from the direction of the mine.
14. My brother and I considered leaving at this point but we were told there was no way out as all the roads had been closed.
15. We stayed awake throughout the night in case we were forced to protect our house from an ember attack. Smoke filled the streets, it had a weird smell and taste.
16. On 9 February 2014 I took a number of photographs of the smoke and fire that are attached to my submission.
17. Over the next few days the smoke remained in the streets. I called the relief centre in Moe to see if they were still open but was informed they had closed as the fire was no longer a danger.
18. On 14 February 2014 I attended the first community meeting held at Kernot Hall, Morwell. Attendees were told I think by an EPA representative that if they could not see in front of them because of the smoke then we should be leaving town. The other information provided was not particularly helpful.
19. At 1.02pm on 15 February 2014 I received the following text message on my phone *"Watch and Act from CFA Morwell West residents shelter indoors immediately, close windows/doors/vents seek further info via radio"*.
20. At 5.44pm on 15 February 2014 I received the following text message on my phone *"Watch and Act message from CFA has been downgraded. Morwell residents can go outside and open doors and windows. Further info via radio and cfa website"*.
21. During the fire period, I was able to seek respite on two occasions; once in Melton and the other time in Warrnambool. I noticed the change immediately, I was able to breath more easily and I was able to sleep without wheezing.
22. My daughter attends Morwell Park Primary School. They chose not to evacuate, instead students went on day trips to Inverloch and other places.
23. My house is located approximately 800 metres from the mine. I had to wipe the window sills down every day to prevent the ash from entering into my house. I have had the carpets professionally cleaned once already but they still don't seem clean. My house is currently black on the outside from all the smoke and ash.

24. I have not made an insurance claim. My business insurance covers my equipment when it is in transit but it is not covered when it is in storage at my house. I am having to clean all of my equipment by hand.

Health

25. I am an asthmatic and have managed my asthma all of my life. Prior to the fire I have only had one asthma attack and that was when I was 10 years old. I have always carried an inhaler but would very rarely have to use it. I have no other pre-existing respiratory or other conditions which placed me in a vulnerable group. Eight years ago I had an accident, as a result my weight increased. The weight increase did not affect my asthma.
26. During the fire I had to visit the doctor as I developed a wheeze and my asthma became significantly worse. I now have to use my inhaler at least 3 times a day. I have now been put on prednisolone tablets and a stronger inhaler.
27. On 11 April 2014 I attended the emergency department of Latrobe Regional Hospital. I was put on a nebuliser to assist my breathing. I spent the day in hospital and was discharged in the early evening. I have not yet received my discharge papers despite being told that they would be sent to my doctor.
28. Currently there is no smoke in Morwell but I'm still experiencing breathing difficulties.
29. During the fire my daughter had sore eyes, a sore throat and a cough most of the time. On 17 February 2014 she had a nose bleed. I took her to the Assessment Centre but she checked out fine.

Employment

30. Just after the fire I was offered a position in the Hazelwood power station as a security guard through a contact I had. I went through the induction process and was given a roster.
31. On 10 February 2014 I appeared on TV as an eyewitness to the fire. I subsequently received a phone call from Rob Locke the Security Manager saying he had received a phone call from Travis of GDF Suez saying that I was no longer able to work for them because I had breached my confidentiality agreement by publicly discussing the fire. I had signed a confidentiality agreement which prohibited me from talking about the mine, but this did not prevent me from talking about the fire.
32. During the fire I was engaged as a contractor for Fusion Foods who supplied catering to the fire fighters in the Hazelwood mine. Following the Voices of the Valley protest in

Melbourne on 11 March 2014 I was told that I could no longer return to the Hazelwood mine to cook.

Voices of the Valley

33. On 26 February 2014 I attended the press conference that Rosemary Lester and Craig Lapsley held in Traralgon with a friend who worked at the Herald Sun. I met three ladies who had started a Facebook page called "Disaster in the Valley". We discussed various aspects of the fire and what we thought. It was suggested that we should hold another meeting and get others who were interested in the issues involved.
34. I believed that if we wanted to be taken seriously we needed to do this properly. I knew that an incorporated association would be given more weight. At our first meeting we formally became Voices of the Valley Inc. *Wendy Farmer is now the President*
35. I am the ^{immediate past} President of Voices of the Valley, The other committee members are Robert Corser as Vice-President, Heather Dawes as Secretary, Deb Hollis as Treasurer and Ron Ipson, Tara Deane, Wendy Farmer, John Arkenstall, Maryanne Robertson, Kerryn Ward and Craig Gittos are ordinary members.
36. Our statement of purpose is as follows:
- *Protect and inform the Latrobe Valley Community.*
 - *Tap into the ideas of the community.*
 - *To advocate for resources on behalf of the Latrobe Valley Community.*
 - *To identify risks and needs and funding required to meet these.*
 - *To advocate on behalf of the health and well-being needs of the Latrobe Valley community.*
 - *To collect, retain and disseminate data of relevance to the health and well-being of the Latrobe Valley community.*
 - *To establish and maintain networks with community groups and members, government bodies and others.*
37. Our purpose is broader than just responding to the Hazelwood mine fire. Going forward we will continue to operate as an incorporated association. We believe that in the future there may be other issues that concern residents of the Valley and we want to give residents a voice.

38. Our membership fee is \$1. We currently have 117 paid members and 948 Facebook members. We hold weekly meetings and maintain two active websites and a Facebook page. We also publish a newsletter.
39. Initially, I only intended to be involved behind the scenes.
40. During the second week of the fire we decided to hold a rally. We asked various figures involved with the Hazelwood mine fire to come along and speak. Craig Lapsley and Richard Di Natale from the Greens party agreed to attend. We extended an invitation to a spokesperson from GDF Suez but they refused to come. Russell Northe, the local member of the Victorian State Government also chose not to attend.
41. On 2 March 2014 we held our rally at Kernot Hall. We advertised the rally via our Facebook page, through local media, letters and by door knocking residents. Approximately 1300 people attended. We had 886 seats in the hall, all of these were occupied and people were standing in the aisles and along the side of the hall.
42. Craig Lapsley and Richard Di Natale addressed the audience. I subsequently learnt that local councillor Graeme Middlemiss attended but did not make himself known.
43. Following the meeting we staged a protest. The police cordoned off some streets in Morwell and attendees walked from Kernot Hall to the Mid Valley Shopping Centre.
44. At the rally we also asked attendees to complete a data questionnaire on the health issues suffered, the financial impact and any other concerns people had in relation to the fire. Attached to my statement and entitled "SE-2" is a blank copy of the data questionnaire that attendees to our rally on 2 March 2014 were asked to complete.
45. 650 attendees completed the survey, which we subsequently compiled into an overview. Attached to my statement and entitled "SE-3" is a summary of the results of the data questionnaire that attendees to the Voices of the Valley rally completed on 2 March 2014.
46. One of our members, Ron Ipson, conducted another health survey between 5 March and 17 March 2014. The survey established what Ron, myself and many others had presumed, namely that people from all areas of the Latrobe Valley were reporting health symptoms and the symptoms were all the same regardless of people's location within the valley. The survey results have been compiled as part of Ron Ipson's submission to the Board of Inquiry. I have seen a copy of Ron Ipson's submission.
47. On 11 March 2014 we hosted a protest march in Melbourne finishing at Parliament House. It was here that we were informed that there would be a public inquiry into the

- Hazelwood Mine fire. Despite this we decided to continue collecting data that could potentially be of assistance to the Inquiry.
48. On 23 March 2014 we held another meeting at Kernot Hall so that local residents could have their say. We wanted the public to tell their story about how they were treated and about how they felt during the fire. In addition to giving people the opportunity to publicly share their story, we asked them to complete an affidavit. We provided pro-forma affidavits and had two Justices of the Peace in attendance to witness people's affidavits. Attached to my statement and entitled "SE-4" is blank copy of the affidavit that we asked people to complete on 23 March 2014.
 49. 67 people have now completed these affidavits. We have compiled the data from these affidavits into a comprehensive overview. Attached to my statement and entitled "SE-5" is a copy of the overview from these affidavits.
 50. We also established a separate questionnaire that we intended to hand out at the Community Consultations hosted by the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry to gather further data. Following our attendance at the first Community Consultation on 10 April 2014, we decided to include the three questions that the Inquiry were asking into our questionnaire and post it online. We did this so that people who were unable to attend the Community Consultations could be heard by the Inquiry. We received approximately 23 responses which we provided to Inquiry staff at the Community Consultation in Traralgon on 16 April 2014.
 51. One of our members, John Stratford who owns the swimming centre at 12 Wallace Street, Morwell sent samples of ash collected on 12 March 2014 to be tested. Attached to my statement and entitled "SE-6" is a copy of the test results.
 52. Currently, Voices of the Valley is dealing with issues associated with clean up and recovery from the fire. We recently sent a letter to the Premier and Treasurer requesting assistance in the budget for associated clean-up costs. We are also still very concerned with the long term health effects from the fire.
 53. On behalf of Voices of the Valley I provided the following documents and items to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry to be considered by the Board of Inquiry:
 - a) Information from the Department of Health, Victoria website published in February 2014 entitled "Brown coal ash and your health" and "Latrobe Valley coal mine fires – as fall-out".

- b) International Chemical Safety Cards for Acetone, Benzene, Ethanol, Methyl Chloride, Naphthalene, Propylene Oxide, Toluene, Methyl Ethyl Ketone, Dichlorodifluoromethane, n-Heptane, n-Hexane and Butadiene.
- c) Table of volatile organic compounds test results from Morwell Bowling Club (Southern Morwell) from 27-28 February 2014 and from 70 Hourigan Road (Eastern Morwell) from 27-28 February.
- d) Email correspondence between Simon Ellis and Russell Northe addressing a range of concerns.
- e) EPA Air Data Charts from 21 February, 23 February, 27 February, 28 February for areas of the valley and wider Victoria.
- f) Dust analysis prepared for the EPA dated 17 March 2014.
- g) Survey results from an online survey with 23 anonymous surveys completed
- h) Blog comments from various dates in March 2014 compiled on 15 April 2014.
- i) 315 petition letters addressed to the Honourable Russell Northe, State MP for Morwell.
- j) Collection of 20 photographs showing smoke over Morwell, undated and exact location unknown.
- k) Poem entitled "Choking on the smoke and lies" by Deearne Nicholson dated 5 March 2014.
- l) Map with hand notations stating "*From Vic Emergency website 23/3/2014*" and "*Why were Tyers, Coalulle, Noawacan, Yinnar, YS, Boolana, JJ & Traralgon Str excluded from the emergency information?*" Two images with hand notations "*From Tyers lookout 15/3/2014*".
- m) Collection of photographs from Maria Marino with hand notations "*insulation in our roof cavity evidence pink batts*".
- n) Vacuum bag containing remnants of ash.
- o) Anonymous survey – 12 respondents with various comments.
- p) Letter to Simon Ellis from Wilma Semmens dated 23 March 2014 regarding disaster in the Valley attaching various material sourced from the internet and relied on in the letter. Concerns the exclusion of fluorine from the EPA monitoring.

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