

Valley's fire fight

New protocols 'not foolproof'

By LOUIS NELSON

UPDATED protocols put in place to protect firefighters from carbon monoxide exposure in the Hazelwood mine will not guarantee their safety, an incident controller has admitted.

CFA deputy regional controller Andrew Zammit said new safety processes established in response to the hospitalisation of about 10 CFA volunteers last week was not foolproof.

"I'm confident the processes we're putting in place will result in less people going to hospital, but we're not in control of the environment 100 per cent of the time so there might be occasions when we need to review our processes..." Mr Zammit said.

The fire in an inactive section of the Morwell open cut, which began last Sunday after spotting from the Hernes Oak fire, has created a carbon monoxide-rich environment in which some firefighters had worked without breathing apparatus equipment.

It has since emerged the majority of affected volunteers are Latrobe Valley-based.

About 20 firefighters are now believed to have attended hospital with exposure symptoms or concerns.

"What I can assure the community and the first responder's families in general is that we're trying to put every process in place to maximise their health and safety," Mr Zammit said.

"I think what people need to bear in mind is the occupation of being first response for the community in one that has inherent risk to it and our job is to make sure we prepare our people in the best way so they are best equipped to deal with it."

However one Latrobe Valley-based volunteer said he refused to go back into the mine after the initial handling of the firefight, referring to the sending of CFA volunteers into the mine as being "treated like guinea pigs".

"This fire is three times as big as the one they had in 2008, so

of course the conditions in there were going to be worse," the volunteer said.

While the volunteer, who wished to remain anonymous, said he personally was not impacted by the increased exposure to carbon monoxide, he said he was speaking out chiefly in concern for the health of his colleagues.

"Us firefighters should never have been brought in there under those circumstances - when we were initially paged to go to the mine site, we had no idea that we were going to be sent into those conditions."

The complex open cut firefight, which is burning on two separate sections on the mine batter,

was scaled back on Wednesday to allow an operational safety review. With firefighting priority being placed on protecting critical infrastructure within the mine, all firefighters entering the mine were being tested for carbon monoxide exposure before and after shifts, and extra breathing apparatus equipment had been

sourced from across Victoria.

More than 170 CFA and Melbourne Fire Brigade firefighters continued to work onsite at the weekend alongside Hazelwood response teams.

Watermain lines are being extended into the fire-affected section of the mine, allowing response crews to position sprinklers above the burn sites, sending continuous streams of water down the burning mine walls.

A CFA spokesperson said fire suppression efforts were focused on areas that will minimise smoke effects for communities and firefighters, taking into account upcoming wind forecasts.

Meanwhile GDF Suez spokesperson Trevor Rowe said mine operations - initially crippled by bushfire electricity blackouts - had returned to normal.

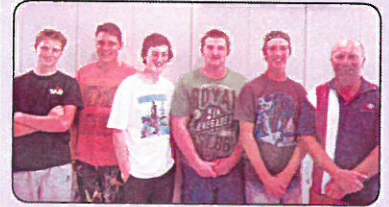
A seventh generation unit was hoped to be brought online on Friday night, with the eighth scheduled to come online at the weekend.



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A GREAT SCHOOL FOR ALL

VCAL students step up at Kurnai



School is back and all members of Kurnai College learning community are off to a great start.

One area enjoying significant change at Kurnai College is the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning program at our precinct campus for years 11 and 12.

Borrowing from best practice across the state, the new-look VCAL program will be more hands on and will focus on real life learning experiences and contexts.

A fantastic example of this real life focus will be the trip to Tasmania by a group of VCAL students to help repair and rebuild damage after last year's bush fires.

In a joint project supported by local bushfire recovery groups, Traralgon South District Association and Rotary Tasmania, five students and VCAL teacher Brett Gay will travel to Tasmania to help with their bushfire recovery program.

The students involved will be working alongside other students from Tasman District School learning valuable skills, helping a community that has suffered significant damage and repay assistance provided to this area from Tasmania.

Kurnai VCAL students will be involved in other hands-on projects this year including the Human Powered Vehicle project and races, and an entrepreneurial catering project.

This year promises to be an engaging time for Kurnai VCAL students.

If you are interested in hearing more about the college's VCAL program, phone Nicole Carder at the precinct Campus of Kurnai College.

Fires flatten plantations



Burnt out: A plantation between Maryvale and Latrobe Road caught the full force of the firefront last Sunday when wind direction changed to a south westerly.

By LOUIS NELSON

THE Latrobe Valley's extensive pine plantations were another notable victim of the Hernes Oak and Morwell fire last week, with swathes of Hancock Victoria Plantation trees lost in the blaze.

While still assessing the extent of the damage on Friday, HVP chief operations officer Cameron MacDonald said thousands of hectares of plantation had been destroyed.

"I was out at our affected Maryvale site this morning where we have 10 to 12 year-old pines which are too small to salvage but difficult to replace, so it's the worst of both worlds

in that sense," Mr MacDonald said.

"Once a tree is 15 years of age it can be recovered, but there is still the issue of charcoal which is a major contaminant (for paper making purposes) so we have to look at how to supply those customers while avoiding that additional issue."

While HVP plantations were under fire, three separate locations across Gippsland - in Stockdale, Yarram and Maryvale were also under attack.

The Stockdale fire was contained by Wednesday, allowing about 110 HVP personal and contractors to allocate resources

to the Yarram and Maryvale clean up operations.

"When the fire picked up on the Sunday, direct attack was not possible because it just wasn't safe, but getting in that evening our crews were able to get in and minimise losses - we've made some big saves," Mr MacDonald said.

"We've got a lot of guys with skills in deploying dozers and knowledge of the landscape geography, so their work has impressed me in terms of the minimal losses we have incurred since Sunday"

Still moving to replant plantation timber in areas lost in the 2009 Black Saturday bushfire,

Mr MacDonald said the latest fire damage would have a noticeable impact on forward production schedules.

"Long term we will have to manage the cash flow of the business having now to incur cost over and above our normal replanting costs," he said.

"Fires are part and parcel of the plantation industry, but you'd like to think we would get a few more years to recover after Black Saturday"

Mr MacDonald said a large timber pile lost at the Maryvale Mill site was mostly eucalypt, and would not create any short term supply issues as most local plantations were pine forests.

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DATES TO REMEMBER

18th February	College Wide Swimming Sports
19th February	Morwell Campus Student Photos
21st February	Churchill Yr 10 Relationship Building - Mirboo North Prec
26th February	Morwell Yr 10 Relationship Building - Mirboo North Prec
27th February	Precinct VCE Theatre Studies - Mid Summer Nights Dream
3rd March	Churchill Yr 9 Outdoor Ed. Life Saving Skills
5th - 7th March	Churchill Yr 9 Edge Base Camp - Wilsons Prom

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