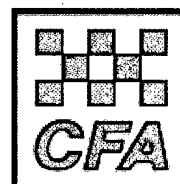


Media release

17 February 2014



Latrobe Valley open cut mine fires - update

Hazelwood mine fire: Deputy Regional Controller Andrew Zammit said firefighters have regained some lost ground at the Hazelwood open cut coal mine after winds fanned the blaze and increased fire activity on Saturday night.

He said south-westerly winds sawfire activity increase on the weekend which resulted in additional smoke.

"The increased fire activity has resulted in more smoke at both the mine and across Morwell and the Latrobe Valley," he said.

"We are measuring particles and carbon monoxide - which are indicators of the level of smoke and air quality - which is used to assess the potential for health impacts.

"EPA says Morwell experienced very poor air quality over the weekend due to smoke. Poor air quality will continue while winds are light and from the south."

Victoria's Chief Health Officer Dr Rosemary Lester said excessive smoke levels can not only aggravate existing heart or lung conditions, but may also cause people to experience irritated eyes, coughing or wheezing.

"Children, the elderly, pregnant women, smokers and those with heart or lung conditions, including asthma are more sensitive to the effects of breathing in fine particles," she said.

"Everyone should avoid prolonged or heavy physical activity and keep informed about fire activity in their immediate area. In extended, very smoky local conditions, sensitive individuals should consider temporarily staying with a friend or relative living outside the smoke-affected area. Others should also consider a break away from the smoky conditions if practical.

"Anyone with a heart or lung condition should take their medication as prescribed by their doctor. People with asthma should follow their asthma management plan."

Mr Zammit said as a result of the elevated smoke, the Division Command Centre which manages the fire will today move to a different area of the mine.

"Separately, we have moved our Incident Control Centre from the mine to Traralgon but this was because it is a purpose-built facility with better I.T and multi-agency capability," he said.

Mr Zammit said light south-westerly breezes could continue all week but would peak around 40km/h on Wednesday, further complicating the fire fight.

He said water in the Hazelwood cooling ponds - being used to douse the fire - has been tested by the EPA as a precaution and initial results received today found no levels of mercury or other contaminants that could pose a health risk.



“The Hazelwood open cut fire is a big operation and currently involves 200 CFA and MFB firefighters, 100 mine staff, 30 incident management team personnel, nine medical monitoring personnel and 80 tankers, trucks and aircraft working around the clock,” Mr Zammit said.

“It is a difficult fire to fight and our people are working incredibly hard in tough conditions. Their safety, and that of the community, is our highest priority and we have brought in additional aircraft today in response to the changing fire and weather conditions and are also setting up unmanned spray systems to reduce the use of firefighters on the coal face.”

There have been 20 firefighters who have presented at hospital. Of those, 19 were due either to illness or because they wanted to be tested for carbon monoxide in the early days of the fire. One fire fighter required medical treatment due to a foreign body in their eye.

“In regards to crew welfare, our firefighters are being properly tested on arrival and when leaving the mine - they can’t leave the site until health monitoring has been completed and this is maintained under a ‘no health tag, no exit’ policy. This is in line with the occupational health and safety plan operating at the mine.” Mr Zammit said.

“Firefighters and mine staff are required to leave the mine every two hours for a break and carbon monoxide levels are regularly checked by each crew using air quality monitors and this information is recorded every 15 minutes. Some firefighters are also required to wear breathing apparatus while fighting the fire.”

Yallourn mine fire: Fire suppression activities at the Yallourn open cut mine are continuing with some success and were not negatively impacted on the weekend. This fire is not currently creating the same difficulties or requiring the same resourcing as Hazelwood.

Community Engagement in Morwell: A community information point was established at Morwell Club from 11-1pm and will be at Morwell Bowls from 5-9pm. A Mobile Information Bus will today visit Moe, Newborough, Hernes Oak and Trafalgar. Community officers walked around Yallourn North from 11-1pm engaging with people.

For information about smoke and health visit: www.health.vic.gov.au

Anyone with concerns about their health should seek medical advice or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.

For information on air quality, visit: www.epa.vic.gov.au

For more information contact CFA Media on:
03 5330 3124 (24 hours) or cfamedia@cfa.vic.gov.au



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