

Incident Control Centre Hazelwood

Media release

7 March 2014

Safety remains paramount at mine fire

Significant progress has been made in reducing active fire within the Hazelwood mine, with approximately 85 per cent of the fire now contained.

On Day 26 of this incident, the safety of firefighters and the community remain Priority Number One. Firefighting water supply and quality is always a critical issue, particularly on such a complex fire.

"We are using water from Pond 4 for firefighting," says Incident Controller John Haynes. "This is where water is taken from for testing three times a week. This is being done in conjunction with EPA and independent hygienists. EPA testing shows us that the water from this pond does not pose a risk to our firefighters.

"Other ponds at the mine may have water with high E.coli levels and other bacteria but we are not using those ponds for firefighting.

"The United Firefighters Union recently contracted a company to take water samples and conduct independent tests. We don't know which pond they took samples from but we firmly believe it was not from Pond 4."

Hygiene processes at the mine have been stepped up to include placing a pump pack of anti-bacterial wash on all trucks, while the use of goggles, disposable nitrile gloves (used underneath PPC gloves) and a mask is strongly recommended for all firefighters working on the incident.

When members are also undergoing health checks before entering the site, they are asked if they have any wounds. If so, waterproof dressing is placed over any wound before entry.

All members are also advised in briefings and at health check to be aware of the situation, and to take responsibility for their own safety, as this should always be their number one priority.

Any firefighters working on the mine site who have queries about safety should contact their local occupational advisor.

"We've got weather conditions in our favour over the next few days," continues John Haynes.

"It's been an exceptional collaborative response to this most complex of fires. We've had crews from interstate including compressed air foam application by Tasmania, ACT and Queensland

Crews remain focused on preventing spread of the fire in the coal batters and continue to monitor all critical infrastructure. Work continues with foam application and aerial water bombing to cool the fire and suppress the smoke, reducing the impact on firefighting personnel, mine workers and the community.

Geotechnical experts have advised the fire continues to burn, on average, only about half a metre below the surface, with a maximum depth of two metres.

Further work has been undertaken to strengthen water supplies so more water can be pumped out of the mine. This will assist with maintaining stability in the mine and allowing increased water capacity for fire fighting if required. Being able to remove more water from the mine floor means more water can be pumped onto the burning coal. It also keeps the mine floor in better condition for fire fighters to operate.

Large volumes of water adds pressure inside the mine and prolonged usage may erode the area, so it's about balancing fire fighting efforts with sound judgement about the safety of our fire crew and being aware of what the mine structure can and can't withstand.

We have fire fighting strategies that are carefully considered with ongoing consultation with the people who know this mine and on-site engineers who understand its geology.

EPA Victoria's unprecedented air monitoring efforts in the Latrobe Valley today revealed the levels of PM2.5 – the invisible particles causing the most health concern for residents – are at their lowest levels since the Hazelwood coal mine fire started almost a month ago.

Carbon monoxide levels from the burning coal are significantly lower than previous weeks when a thick plume of smoke blanketed Morwell and neighbouring towns.

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