

Incident Control Centre Hazelwood

MEDIA RELEASE

10 March 2014

Hazelwood open cut mine fire - update

Fire: The Hazelwood open cut mine fire is controlled after 29 days of extensive firefighting, Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley said today.

The fire is out, with only small hot spots being monitored and extinguished with specialist equipment.

The firefight, which has involved CFA, MFB, DEPI, Parks Victoria, airport firefighters and five interstate fire services, has been complex because of the challenges provided by a brown coal open cut fire. The effort of all firefighters has to be acknowledged as they have worked 24/7 over the past four weeks.

"The suppression strategy has been successful across the entire fire area including the northern and southern batters and the floor of the mine with no, or limited, smoke issuing from these fire areas," he said.

"The emergency services have done a fantastic job getting this difficult fire to this stage and this will be welcome news for the local community."

Mr Lapsley said over the next 10 days firefighters will continue to work with the mine staff to secure and maintain the fire areas and to respond to any small pockets of heat or smoke that occur.

"The fire is controlled but it still needs to be fully extinguished – at times there will still be small amounts of smoke and possibly ash but not at levels that will cause people concern," he said.

"We have warm weather coming up so we will keep monitoring conditions and our fire trucks will remain to make sure any hot pockets of coal that emerge are attended to immediately."

The incident began 29 days ago when two grass fires – at least one of which is believed to be deliberately lit - spotted into the disused section of the mine. At its worst point, the burning coal was around 3km long and 120m high.

Mr Lapsley praised the multi-agency approach to managing the fire with CFA, MFB, DEPI, Parks Victoria, Department of Health, Victoria Police, Vic Roads, DEECD, DHS, EPA, Ambulance Victoria, Red Cross, St John, DSDBI, Victorian Council of Churches, local council, interstate fire crews from four states and more all working together.

Air Quality: EPA CEO John Merritt assured residents EPA's air quality monitoring efforts would continue for the foreseeable future.

"Even after the fire is out, smoke will linger. It is vital that we remain vigilant with our systematic air quality monitoring and reporting, to provide that data to the Department of Health to assess potential health impacts and advise the public accordingly," he said.



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"We have fixed and mobile monitoring devices measuring air quality 24 hours a day across the region. The monitoring locations have been specifically chosen to ensure they are in the right places to capture the overall air quality in the region, as well as the very worst particle levels."

Health: Victoria's Chief Health Officer, Dr Rosemary Lester, said that despite the improvement in the mine fire, the current health advice remains in place.

"People over 65, pre-school aged children, pregnant women and those with pre-existing heart or lung conditions living or working in southern Morwell are advised to consider relocating," she said.

"We are hopeful that in coming days we will be able to review this advice."

Assistance and information about the clean-up of homes and business premises will be made available through the Department of Human Services and the City of Latrobe.

The details of this aspect of the recovery process for Morwell will be announced by the DHS and the council in the near future.

Dr Lester said the health of the people of Morwell is her first priority.

"The Department of Health will continue to be advised by the Environment Protection Authority of its continuing air quality data.

"We will also be advised of any change in the fire behaviour."

Dr Lester said the Community Health Assessment Centre will continue to operate for at least the next three weeks and then a decision on its future will be taken.

The Community Health Assessment Centre has been an important service for the people of Morwell and has provided residents with reassurance about their health through basic health checks and advice from ambulance paramedics and nurses.