

3.4 Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Public Hearing

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Appendix:

1. Draft submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry - July 2015 (D15/63029)

Officer Direct or Indirect Conflict of Interest:

In accordance with Local Government Act 1989 –
Section 80C:

Yes

No

Reason: Nil

Status:

Information classified confidential under Section 77
of the Local Government Act:

Yes

No

Reason: Nil

Purpose

To endorse the submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry prior to the Inquiry's public hearing on 30-31 July 2015 at the Anglesea Memorial Hall.

Summary

On 9 February 2014 fires took hold in the Hazelwood coal mine as a result of embers spotting from nearby bushfires. The mine fire burned for 45 days, sending smoke and ash over Morwell and surrounding areas for much of that time. The Hazelwood mine fire constituted two emergencies: a major complex fire emergency and a serious public health emergency.

On 26 May 2015 The Andrews Labour Government reopened the previously concluded Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire Inquiry. Under its terms of reference the Board of Inquiry is examining three areas of interest:

1. Options to decrease the risk of fire arising from or impacting the Anglesea Mine;
2. Health impacts on the Latrobe Valley community resulting from the 2014 Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire; and
3. Mine rehabilitation options for the three Latrobe Valley coal mines.

Reference 11 in the terms of reference requires the Board to inquire into and report on '*Sustainable, practical and effective options that could be undertaken by the mine operator to decrease the risk of fire arising from or impacting the Anglesea Mine for the 2015/2016 summer season, noting the impending closure of the mine on 31 August 2015.*'

Public consultation with the Anglesea community is occurring and Council has been involved. Written submissions are invited. Council's proposed written submission to the Inquiry is attached at Appendix 1.

Recommendation

That Council provide the written submission included as Appendix 1 to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry.

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Report

Background

On 9 February 2014 fires took hold in the Hazelwood coal mine as a result of embers spotting from bushfires. The mine fire burned for 45 days, sending smoke and ash over Morwell and surrounding areas for much of that time. The Hazelwood mine fire constituted two emergencies: a major complex fire emergency and a serious public health emergency. The estimated cost of the fire exceeds \$100 million.

On 11 March 2014 the Premier of Victoria announced an independent inquiry into the circumstances of the Hazelwood coal mine fire. On 21 March 2014 a formal Board of Inquiry was appointed and a final report was tabled in Parliament on 2 September 2014. As a recommendation of the final report two Taskforces were established across the state including one in Surf Coast Shire.

In November 2014 the Surf Coast Coal Mine Emergency Management Taskforce was established to ensure that the relevant lessons from the Hazelwood fire were applied at the Anglesea Alcoa coal mine and that the appropriate plans were in place to manage the risks. Emergency Management Commissioner of Victoria Craig Lapsley chairs the task force and members include officers from Alcoa, Surf Coast Shire Council, CFA, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources (DEDJTR), the Victorian WorkCover Authority, Environment Protection Authority, Emergency Management Victoria and Department of Health and Human Services. To date, the taskforce has held three meetings and is due to conclude by December 2015. The most recent meeting was after Alcoa's announcement that it would be ceasing its mining and power station operations at Anglesea.

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Community consultation sessions conducted by the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Board were held on 28 June 2015 to share details of the Inquiry process with the community and to hear from people in the local area about what questions could be answered by the mine operator. Formal public hearings for Anglesea will be held on 30 & 31 July 2015 at the Anglesea Memorial Hall. Written submissions are also invited and a Council submission is attached.

Discussion

Since the announcement that Alcoa's Anglesea coal mine and power operations will cease by 31 August 2015, the Surf Coast Coal Mine Emergency Management Taskforce has been briefed by Alcoa on the proposed planning for fire mitigation works for the upcoming fire season.

Prior to the closure announcement the Taskforce has been working with Alcoa to gain an insight into the existing fire management planning, mitigation activities and the significant differences between the Anglesea and Morwell mines. Some of the key differences include:

- The Anglesea mine is a substantially smaller scale than Hazelwood
- The Anglesea coal is less volatile and less susceptible to spontaneous combustion type fire
- Anglesea's mined out areas are continuously backfilled and rehabilitated due to the large amount of overburden available reducing the amount of exposed coal. Compared to Latrobe Valley, where the mine areas are expanding, Anglesea's coal area has been successively rehabilitated and so it is more like moving the active mine around a larger rehabilitated mine area
- The Hazelwood and Anglesea mines have different coal seam thickness.
- Anglesea has much lower coal face heights than the Hazelwood mine. Anglesea mine faces are easily accessible by either excavator or bulldozer meaning any fires that occur on the coal faces, as was occurring at Hazelwood, can be easily smothered and extinguished.

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The most recent taskforce meeting was after Alcoa's announcement that it would be ceasing its mining and power station operations at Anglesea and at that meeting Alcoa advised:

- Before the 31 August 2015 all exposed coal will be covered over with at least one metre of soil which will substantially reduce the risk of fire arising from or impacting the Anglesea Mine.
- Alcoa will document an explanation on how the fire risks will be managed into the longer term, and use an external verification process to ensure that there is a high level of confidence in the longer term plan.
- Managing the fire risks in the short, medium and longer term is a priority for Alcoa.

Coal seam fires could occur in the Anglesea area regardless of whether there is an active mine or not. Once the coal mine is covered over the risk is more likely to be an undetected underground fire that becomes large and difficult to extinguish. Coal burning deep underground can threaten the environment and human life and has been a big concern in Indonesia, China, India and other countries. Large-scale underground blazes can cause the ground temperature to heat up and kill surrounding vegetation, produce greenhouse gases and can even ignite forest fires. The resulting release of toxic elements can also pollute local water sources and soils and result in a serious public health issue.

Large coal seam mines have burnt for decades in the United States. Australia is home to one of the world's few naturally burning coal seams, Burning Mountain Nature Reserve, in north-eastern New South Wales estimated to be about 5,500 years old.

Whilst the likelihood of this kind of fire occurring in Anglesea may be small, the consequences of such an event could be devastating; therefore it is important that there are appropriate risk mitigation strategies in place.

Financial Implications

The financial implications of a large coal mine fire would be very significant. There are no financial implications to Council in making the resolutions listed in this report.

Council Plan

Council has key legislated emergency management responsibilities and the Anglesea coal mine and power station have significant emergency aspects for our Shire.

Policy/Legal Implications

There are no policy/legal implications.

Officer Direct or Indirect Interest

No officer involved in the preparation of this report has any conflicts of interest.

Risk Assessment

With the coal mine ceasing operations and being covered with soil before this coming fire season, the likelihood of a bushfire or other fire igniting the coal is much less than with an active open cut mine. Currently the coal mine provides a bushfire buffer to Anglesea so long as the coal does not become part of the fuel for the fire. The type, arrangement and amount of vegetation that grows over the coal mine rehabilitation surface may result in a higher bushfire risk for Anglesea. It will be important for the Anglesea community that the short, medium and long term arrangements for the mine rehabilitation do not elevate these risks to unacceptable levels.

Social Considerations

The social impacts of the Hazelwood Fire were very high and would also be for Anglesea and the Surf Coast in a similar situation. Many Shire community members would expect Council to advocate to the inquiry that their interests are protected in the short, medium and longer term.

Community Engagement

The Board of inquiry will consider written submissions and run community consultation sessions relating to its three areas of interest in Anglesea and the Latrobe Valley at specific times throughout the year.

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Environmental Implications

The environmental impacts of a coal mine fire at Anglesea would be very significant. It is expected that this is one important aspect that the Inquiry will consider.

Communication

The Council resolution, including the submission will be made available to the Inquiry and made public through Council's normal communication methods.

Conclusion

The Hazelwood coal mine fire provides an opportunity to investigate the likelihood and consequences of a similar fire at Anglesea. Through the Surf Coast Coal Mine Emergency Management Taskforce it is clear that the circumstances at Anglesea are quite different to Hazelwood and that the chances of a similar large fire appears unlikely. The pending closure and covering of the coal mine will further reduce the likelihood of a fire arising from or impacting the Anglesea Mine for the 2015/2016 summer season and beyond.

Although the likelihood of a Hazelwood type fire is much lower in Anglesea, the consequences of such a fire could be extreme for the Anglesea and Surf Coast community and therefore appropriate risk mitigation measure are important.

The areas of interest that the Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire Inquiry is examining are of interest to the Surf Coast Shire community and will influence the rehabilitation options for the Anglesea coal mine. Council should continue to work with the Surf Coast Coal Mine Emergency Management Taskforce and the inquiry to ensure that risks are adequately managed and any risk management opportunities with the cessation of the coal mine and power station are realised.

Further Council briefings can be provided as the rehabilitation plans for Alcoa's operations evolve and when the Inquiry Report is complete.