

From: [Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry](#)
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Subject: Morwell Mine Fire Submission
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Attachments: [Submission-by-Wendy-Farmer..docx](#)

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Content of submission (you can choose multiple): Health

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Submission by Wendy Farmer "I make this submission in my personal capacity. I am, however, a member of Voices of the Valley, and I am aware they have made a submission, which I support. "

Health Impacts Associated with the Hazelwood Mine fire

10th August 2015

7. Short, medium and long term measures to improve the health of the Latrobe Valley communities having regard to any health impacts identified by the Board as being associated with the Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire;

What has this fire done to our community? What are we leaving future generations?

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission into the reopened Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry. I have decided to make a personal submission, as I believe we have too many people who are disempowered & scared to make submissions. The people in the Valley understand that to have a job, particularly in the power industry ensure some financial stability in an area with such high unemployment opportunities and lack of other jobs in the Valley.

Background

Before the Hazelwood Fire I was just an ordinary person who was not a community activist. I was born in the Valley and lived here all my life with my family which now includes grandchildren. Four generations in the Valley.

As the president of Voices of the Valley I have been privy to a lot of people who have opened their hurt hearts to me.

However, there is a cone of silence within the community, people not wanting to make waves to protect what they have and are unable to speak out publicly. There are many reasons for this:

- As their families, friends and community don't want them to speak out,
- Some of these people are linked or work in the power industry
- Others just tell them they are stupid and how can they blame these health impacts on the Mine fire
- There is an unspoken code about protecting the jobs within their families which enable them to survive in the Valley.

In my role as President of Voices of the Valley I have been privy to personal stories from worried and concerned people and families which are told to me in confidence. These residents are afraid of talking out publicly.

The Light Bulb Moment

A few months ago I was listening to the radio when I was driving home from work after listening to another person suffering what they believe to be health impacts from the

Hazelwood Mine Fire disaster. This segment was a catalyst for me. The ABC was broadcasting about the findings of a pedophile trial in Bendigo. They were talking about the victims that had been abused. The abuse was covered up, by not only their family that didn't want to be ashamed this had happened to a family member but also by the church and the community. **The victims were gagged and left to suffer alone to protect others.**

It hit me that this is what seems to be happening in the Latrobe Valley. So many people are suffering, they are ill, their families are ill, they believe it is from the Hazelwood Mine Fire in the air, smoke and pollution they were breathing during those 45 days; Feb-March 2014.

However, they are scared of what will become of the Hazelwood mine. Yes it may be making them sick but without it we don't have jobs. There are so few jobs available in the Valley.

In my role as president of the Voices of the Valley I have interviewed many people for health surveys. People call me at home. Approach me in the street to tell me their story. I believe I am the holder of a great deal of information which is not in the public realm.

I have shed lots of tears with people that have been desperate & scared not knowing where to turn to. Dads and Mums who want to protect their children but didn't evacuate the area as they believed at the time it was okay to stay. They now sit with their children who are having asthma attacks or other health issues wishing they can make it all better. These parents didn't act at the time as the Chief Health Officer Rosemary Lester said it would not affect their family.

These families now wonder what the future will hold for them. I have listened to the young girl planning to be a mother only to miscarry through the fire then to become pregnant again with a deformed baby which would die at birth. The young girl who has suffered a brain aneurysm, or the wife who has lost her partner from an aneurysm, the agony and pain goes on. These people may never know 100% whether these have happened because of the fire.

But these people do want answers.

We know that pollution causes health impacts, in fact 3000 people a year in Australia die from pollution, this is more than die from car accidents but we continue to ignore this evidence.

Inconsistencies between the community and the firefighters and workers in the mine.

In the HMF I report, under Health and Wellbeing, there is acknowledgement that there were inconsistencies in the acute exposure standards for the community carbon monoxide protocol vs the firefighter carbon monoxide protocol. This meant that levels that were not considered safe for firefighters and required evacuation, did not require the same response if the level was measured in the community.

So if there are emerging serious health impacts for the firefighter who had stricter carbon monoxide protocols and were evacuated, what does this mean for our community who were living for 45 days in the same smoke and pollution levels. We weren't evacuated. From your report the toxic nature from the Hazelwood Mine Fire has raised community and

medical concerns that there will be ongoing physical and mental health implications. We are seeing this now as is shown in our health surveys. The health survey is part of the Voices of the Valley submission.

Savona, Italy

At the time of the Hazelwood Mine Fire, Italian courts seized the GDF Suez mine in Italy after they were found to have contributed to 442 premature deaths and 2,000 cases of heart and lung disease. (<http://treealerts.org/region/europe/2014/03/energy-giant-gdf-suez-in-court-over-coal-health-impacts/>) It seems this company doesn't seem to really care about the people or environment they operate in.

Who is Responsible?

If I was to store drums of fuel in my back yard adding to it continuously until my yard was full of barrels of fuel, the neighbors child threw a match & the drums exploded I am sure I would be to blame not the person who threw the match. I would have a responsibility to make sure the area around my property was safe.

We feel the same when it comes to mining companies in our communities.

Lack of Relevant Medical Specialists in the Latrobe Valley

People have gone to doctors and doctors have not known what to look for but only given common medications as in basic asthma medications, ventolin etc. We know that Latrobe Valley suffers some of the highest rates of cancers & respiratory diseases yet we don't have specialists in these areas, and if we do have a medical specialist there is an extremely long wait.

I have known of cases where parents have been told it could be a 6 month wait to see a pediatrician, or someone diagnosed with a heart problems have been told the wait is 7 weeks.

Specialists in Medical Health relating specifically to Coal Mine Fires

Latrobe Valley residents require specialists who know about health impacts from coal & fires situated here.

- We need respiratory specialists who have a deeper understanding and knowledge of the health impacts of the smoke and pollution which covered the community for 45 days.
- We need specialist scanning equipment for Doctors to undertake the investigations required in the Latrobe Valley as currently people are sent to Melbourne areas. This is a cost, and time and very inconvenient for older people and young families.
- It is well known that Latrobe Valley has poor health and is a low socioeconomic area, the costs associated with travel is not always easy or in some cases unaffordable so tests are not always followed through. This is a significant barrier.

In the HMF I report it states that 'there was not a coordinated whole of health sector approach to the health of the population of the Latrobe Valley. There is a strong case for the health of the people to be substantially improved. Now 18 months later, and 10 months since your report was released, we still do not have this occurring. I can vouch for this as I am fielding call and enquiries every few days.

Ash in the Roof Cavity of Houses

I have spoken to many families that are still concerned about ash that settled in their homes and particularly in their roof cavity. Some houses have been decontaminated including ceiling cavities vacuumed and insulation replaced. From Voices of the Valley survey of 200 homes only 7% of homes have had the cleaning done.

This a complex issue depending on who owns the house:

- The biggest barrier to decontamination is the large cost of decontamination- about \$10,000 per house
- Whether insurance was willing to cover it,
- The family could afford the excess on the policy to have their home professionally decontaminated,
- If the home was owned by a landlord, then the tenant has no control over the decontamination of their home
- If the home is owned by the Ministry of Housing then it is the department decision.
- There is no real data been collected on the number of houses cleaned.

Then there is the contamination in publicly used facilities like schools, child care centres, the neighbourhood houses, kindergartens, aged care facilities, sporting clubs and community amenities. No survey has been done. It should not be the responsibility of community volunteers to do this.

The Latrobe Valley has a high percentage of rental homes (many owned by the Office of Housing) or home-owners that don't have the money to pay an insurance excess. So many of the community are still living in contaminated homes.

Most of the homes which were decontaminated, were eventually done by insurance companies. The residents are feeling better with much less asthma and respiratory symptoms and other health issues.

Health Needs of the Latrobe Valley

In the 2014 Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report, there was a recommendation for the health needs of the Latrobe Valley and the establishment of a Health Conservation Zone. However it is now 18 months since the fire and there are serious emerging health issues which our Voices of the Valley health survey has found. I believe that we need interventions now as a preventative measures. I ask the Board to look into the implementation of these recommendations. These health issues effect families, causing illness as well as stress and anxiety. This is exacerbated when appropriate medical attention is delayed or doesn't occur.

Seeing the serious health impacts already starting to come out with firefighters and people that were working in the mine at the time of the fire, I am scared of what the future holds.

I have never known so many people in the valley with lung problems.

I am really looking forward to some much needed help and attention with answers coming out of this Inquiry.