

6 October 2015

**Additional submission to the Inquiry: Term of Reference 7**

Voices of the Valley wish to make an additional submission in relation to term of reference 7.

Coordination of health services

The Panel hearings in relation to Term of Reference 7 highlighted that there are many organisations with programs operating in the Latrobe Valley, many of which are doing very good work. However, it also became evident that, despite the programs in place to address health issues in the Valley, overall, the health of the Latrobe Valley community is not improving and many health needs of residents are not being met. In making any plans for addressing the health needs of the Latrobe Valley, the starting point needs to be an analysis of the needs of the residents of the Latrobe Valley, as opposed to what health services and programs are currently being provided.

Voices of the Valley submit that the Board make the following recommendation:

- (i) The unmet health needs of the Latrobe Valley community be ascertained and analysed, and the results of the analysis be used to guide decisions about provision of additional health resources.
- (ii) Existing health services be better coordinated to ensure that the health services and programs available are as effective as possible, and capable of adapting to and responding to unmet health needs.

Department of Health fact sheets and education of local medical practitioners

The evidence presented at the hearing into term of reference 6 raised issues in relation the 'fact sheets' prepared by the Department of Health. Specifically, evidence given to the Inquiry suggested that the fact sheets do not present a complete and unbiased analysis of the data and sought to downplay the possibility that deaths occurred as a result of the mine fire.<sup>1</sup>

Community members have been informed by some local medical professionals that the medical professionals have used the fact sheets to inform themselves of the potential health impacts of the mine fire.

Therefore, Voices of the Valley submit that the Board should make the following recommendations:

- (iii) The current fact sheets be updated and replaced, and include information consistent with the evidence on mortality and morbidity presented to the Inquiry. It is submitted that this should occur as soon as possible. It is also submitted that health professionals in the Latrobe Valley be made aware of these updated fact sheets, and advised not to rely on the current fact sheets.

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<sup>1</sup> Exhibit 29, [31]

(iv) The Health Department implement a program to educate health professionals in the Latrobe Valley of the possible health impacts on residents of the Latrobe Valley that may arise as a result of exposure to the smoke and ash from the fire. This education program should educate health professionals on the following matters:

- the pollutants that residents were potentially exposed to;
- the health impacts of exposure to those pollutants;
- what tests and investigations need to be done to identify whether residents are experiencing health impacts as a result of exposure to pollutants; and
- what the appropriate treatments for conditions caused or exacerbated by the mine fire are.

#### Long-term Health Study

Evidence in the hearings into term of reference 6 indicated that the health impacts of the coal mine fire are expected to extend beyond Morwell, into other areas of the Latrobe Valley that experienced significant exposure to the smoke and ash from the coal mine fire.<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with evidence presented to the Inquiry in 2014 that showed that when particulate matter (PM2.5) levels were high in Morwell East, they were also high in Traralgon.<sup>3</sup>

Relatedly, the CSIRO modelling of exposure of residents to pollution, referred to in the evidence of Dr Abramson,<sup>4</sup> highlighted that areas other than Morwell would have been significantly exposed to smoke and ash on some days. This modelling took into account important evidence about wind direction. Voices of the Valley notes that, based on their local knowledge, geography should also be added into analysis, as this also affects air movements in the Valley, particularly at night.

Therefore, Voices of the Valley submit that the Board make the following recommendations:

- (v) As part of any review of the Long-term health study, the whole of Latrobe Valley, or alternatively, any areas in the Valley that were exposed to at least 20 per cent of the exposure of Morwell, be included in the health study.
- (vi) The CSIRO analysis on exposure of residents to smoke also take into account geography, time of day and how these influenced exposure levels to smoke and ash during the mine fire.

In addition, there was evidence that the Long-term Health Study would only be published if the people undertaking the research determined to publish the findings.<sup>5</sup> Voices of the Valley are of the view that the findings should be made public.

Voice of the Valley submits that the Board should make the following recommendations:

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<sup>2</sup> Exhibit 6, Attachment 1

<sup>3</sup> Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report 2014, page 280

<sup>4</sup> Exhibit 6, Attachment 1

<sup>5</sup> T350:16-17

- (vii) The terms of engagement of the experts undertaking the Long Term Health Study be amended to make explicit that all and any findings, and the bases for the findings, of the health study will be publicly released.

In addition, as previously noted by Voices of the Valley, employees, contractors and volunteers who were in the Latrobe Valley daily during the mine fire, but do not reside in Morwell, are not covered by the Long-term health Study. Voices of the Valley submit that it is important that the impacts of the mine fire on these people be investigated. If it is not possible to incorporate these people within the scope of the Long term Health Study, then some alternative study or investigation should be devised that assesses and investigates the health impacts on employees, contractors and volunteers in the Latrobe Valley during the mine fire. Voices of the valley submit that the board should make the following recommendation:

- (viii) The health impacts of the mine fire on employees, contractors and volunteers who were in the Latrobe Valley on a regular basis during the fire be investigated.

#### Access to Information

The community have experienced significant frustration about not having access to timely information, or sufficient information about matters relating to the mine fire, including on pollution. The evidence also showed that, despite the community raising concerns about serious matters, based on significant data and investigation they had done themselves, they were not taken seriously by some sections of the government. This has eroded the trust of the community in government agencies.

As a result of the experience with the mine fire, the community have become concerned about the day-to-day health impacts of having major coal mining and power generation facilities located so close to towns.

To ensure that the community can have available information on matters which may have significant impacts on their health, to enable the community to make its own judgment and choices, Voices of the Valley submit that the Board should recommend that:

- (ix) Air quality monitors should be permanently installed in all communities in the Latrobe Valley as a priority, and the results of the monitoring should be live streamed a publicly accessible website maintained by an organisation such as the EPA.
- (x) Air quality monitors should be permanently installed at the boundaries of all significant sources of emissions to the airshed of the Latrobe Valley, to monitor the emissions from each emissions source. Installation and monitoring should be at the expense of the operator of the emissions source. The results of the monitoring should be live streamed a publicly accessible website.

#### Hazelwood Health Clinic

The recently established Health Clinic, whilst positive in and of itself, is not meeting the needs of the Latrobe Valley residents who have concerns about health impacts of the mine fire. Nurses who are unable to make referrals or order tests or otherwise diagnose certain conditions currently staff the Health Clinic. Frequently, all these nurses are able to do is advise people to visit their doctor about their concerns. The Clinic is not meeting

the health needs created by the mine fire. In addition, people within the community are not aware of the existence of the health clinic.

As a result, Voices of the Valley submits that Board should recommend that:

- (xi) The purpose and scope of services provided by the health clinic be upgraded, in light of the findings of the Inquiry in relation to Term of Reference 7.
- (xii) The health clinic improve its engagement with the community, to both make the community aware of the services it provides, and to seek feed back from the community so that the services offered by the clinic are more responsive to community need.
- (xiii) In the longer term, consider whether it is appropriate to incorporate the health clinic into the wellness hub clinic, as discussed below.

#### Health Conservation Zone

As previously submitted by Voices of the Valley, and recommended by the Board of Inquiry in 2014, Voices of the Valley would like to see the creation of a Health Conservation Zone over the Latrobe Valley. We note that this issue is to be discussed in session 11. Voices of the Valley reiterate its support for the proposal in the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report 2014, which proposed the Health Conservation Zone coordinate and integrate “health services with responses which tackle the broader social and environmental determinants of health”. In relation to this session, Voices of the Valley submit that the following specific proposals be considered:

- (xiv) That a health conservation zone, designed to promote wellness of the community within the zone, be established for the Latrobe Valley. The health conservation zone should be serviced by a wellness hub clinic that facilitates or undertakes the following:
  - a. provides information and programs directed at promoting wellness and good health;
  - b. assisting members of the community navigate the health system to ensure that those with health concerns can access services and available sources of funding for any treatment; and
  - c. Providing education for local medical professionals as discussed in recommendation (iv).
- (xv) As part of the health conservation zone, additional funding to enable research and trials, including research of the impacts of air emissions, as monitored as per recommendation (ix) and (x) be provided.
- (xvi) That the boundaries of the Health Conservation Zone be consistent with that in the CSIRO modelling done that shows which areas in the Latrobe Valley were affected by the mine fire.

#### Energy Transition

The coal industry contributes to air pollution, which contributes to the health problems in the Latrobe Valley. The most extreme example of this occurred during the mine fire, where evidence provided to the Inquiry indicates that it is probable that, as a result of the smoke and ash emitted from the fire, hospital admissions and deaths increased. The community are still experiencing health impacts as a result of the mine fire.

On the other hand, the coal industry provides an important source of jobs in the Latrobe Valley community. A large part of health is societal and jobs and hope have marked effect on the health of a community. It is highly probable that in 30 years there will be no coal burning power generation in the Valley as the last of the stations reach their end of life cycle, become unviable and are not replaced. If the coal industry is not replaced with other industry and employment, the impacts on the mental and physical wellbeing of the Latrobe Valley will be negative. We have already witnessed the negative social and health impacts of a decline in jobs in the Valley, following the privatization of the electricity industry and associated coal mines.

A well- thought out and resourced process for designing and implementing a transition plan to deal with the decline of the coal industry is needed. Voices of the Valley submit that the Latrobe Valley has the infrastructure and human resources to make it ideally suited to becoming the energy storage and renewable energy hub for Victoria, and that this should be part of any transition plan. Therefore, Voices of the Valley submit that the Board should recommend:

(xvii) The state government arrange for a detailed transition plan to be prepared for the Latrobe Valley, to plan for the transition from the coal industry to alternative industries based in the Valley, including the energy storage industry. The process must ensure opportunities for comprehensive and proactive community engagement on the detail of the plan as well as a timeframe for its implementation. Matters such as training needs of the community and government support required should be considered.

(xviii) The transition plan and the health conservation zone projects should be linked. The linking of the projects could provide opportunities for trials of innovative projects responsive to the unique health and social needs of the Latrobe Valley.

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**Environmental Justice Australia**