

25 September 2015

Board of the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry
Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Dear Board Members

Additional submission to the Inquiry: Term of Reference 7

We act for Voices of the Valley in relation to term of reference 7 of the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry.

Voices of the Valley wish to make an additional submission in relation to term of reference 7, to address issues related to evidence given at the hearings in relation to term of reference 6, other matters not covered in their submission, and on the proposed format of the process for inquiring into term of reference 7.

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 in the Inquiry suggested that the fact sheets did 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.¹

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:

- (i) 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.
- (ii) 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

¹ Exhibit 29, [31]

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.

We ask that the Board consider discussing the details of any health education program as part of session 5 of the Health Improvement Forum.

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.² 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.³

Relatedly, the CSIRO modelling of exposure of residents to pollution, referred to in the evidence of Dr Abramson,⁴ 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 submit that, based on their local knowledge, geography should also be added into CSIRO's analysis, as this also affects air movements in the Valley.

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

- (iii) 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.
- (iv) The CSIRO analysis on exposure of residents to smoke also take into account geography, and how it influenced levels exposure 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.⁵ Voices of the Valley are of the view that the findings should be made public.

² Exhibit 6, Attachment 1

³ Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report 2014, page 280

⁴ Exhibit 6, Attachment 1

⁵ T350: 16-17

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

- (v) 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.

Access to Information / Air Monitoring

The community have experienced significant frustration about not having access to timely information, or sufficient information about matters relating to the mine fire, including 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:

- (vi) Air quality monitors should be permanently installed around all mines in Latrobe Valley, and the results of the monitoring should be live streamed a publicly accessible website maintained by an organisation such as the EPA.

We further request that the Panel consider this recommendation at session 8 of the Health Improvement Forums.

Health Conservation Zone

As previously submitted by Voices of the Valley, and recommended by the 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. In relation to this session, Voices of the Valley submit that the following proposals be considered:

- (vii) 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.

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. The Health Clinic is currently staffed by a nurse who is unable to make referrals, order tests or otherwise diagnose certain conditions. Frequently, all the nurse is able to do is advise people to visit their doctor about their concerns. The Health Clinic is not currently fulfilling the health needs created by the mine fire.

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

- (viii) The purpose and scope of services provided by the Health Clinic be reviewed, in light of the findings of the Inquiry in relation to Term of Reference 7.

Voices of the Valley seek that this issue be discussed by the Panels as part of sessions 1, 4 and 9.

Cleaning of houses affected by ash

Several people affected by ash from the mine fire have still not been able to fully clean their houses to remove all remaining ash. Ash remaining in roof cavities is a particular concern. Proper removal of ash from the mine fire requires professional cleaners, which many people in the Latrobe Valley are unable to afford. Voices of the Valley submit that the Board should make the following recommendation:

- (ix) Professional cleaners be provided to any households affected by ash from the mine fire, who have not yet had their residence properly cleaned and are still affected by ash.

We submit that this issue is relevant to sessions 8 and 9 of the Health Improvement Forums.

Format of Inquiry into Term of Reference 7

Based on the 'Health Improvement Forums - Information Sheet' issued by the Inquiry in relation to Term of Reference 7, it appears that a wide ranging review of health impacts and challenges facing the people of the Latrobe Valley is proposed. Whilst this is positive in one sense, it appears that the impacts of the mine fire and how these should be better understood, identified, treated and managed will not be considered in detail. Voices of the Valley are concerned by this. Voices of the Valley have experienced various forms of government resistance to their requests for assessment and responses to the health concerns of the Latrobe Valley residents arising from the coal mine fire. Voices of the Valley consider the Inquiry process an essential process in having their concerns about health impacts on the community fully and independently considered.

We note that only one representative of Voices of the Valley has been asked to appear on a Panel. Ideally, Voices of the Valley would like to see one representative of Voices of the Valley on each of the Panels. If this is not possible, voices of the Valley are of the view that, in particular, they have valuable knowledge and experience in relation to session topics 4 and 8, and seek that the Inquiry consider inviting Voices of the Valley representatives to participate as panel members in these discussions.

Voices of the Valley understand that they are not medical experts. However, they have a detailed understanding of their community's concerns and needs. They also have first hand and anecdotal knowledge of how the community have experienced health care, which is invaluable in outlining the problems to be addressed by the Panel. Finally, Voices of the Valley representatives could assist in acting as a 'reality check', to ensure any proposed solutions are appropriate and adapted to the needs of the Latrobe Valley residents.

Several of the problems with responding to the mine fire have arisen because community views were not listened to and acted upon. It is essential that community needs be considered in designing any health response. We are concerned that the format of term of reference 7 as it is currently framed does not adequately allow for this to occur.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like to discuss any of the issues raised above in more detail.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'F. Millner'.

Felicity Millner

Director of Litigation