

Hazelwood open cut mine fire – Health study

Community update

9 May 2014

About the consultation:

Over 100 members of the Morwell community attended consultation sessions with the Department of Health to learn more about the health study and help provide input into its design.

They included local residents, health professionals and residents from other cultures. The Chief Health Officer listened to people living and working in Morwell and the surrounding area during the fire as they shared their concerns about their health and the possible long term impacts of the smoke and ash.

This community update provides a summary of their feedback.

What will happen to the information we shared?

No personal details were collected. The information has been sorted into common themes and will be provided to the researchers to consider in the development of the study. It is important to understand that not all ideas may be possible for the researchers to include.

About the health study:

Why does the community want this study?

To validate the experiences of the community in relation to the ash and smoke, especially the short term issues impacting on health and wellbeing.

To make sure health service providers are aware of the issues being faced by the community and able to respond early.

To provide evidence-based answers to legitimate community concerns about any potential long term health impacts from the coal mine fire.

What should the study look for?

Long term health impacts:

The community wants to know if there will be any long term health impacts including heart and lung disease, cancers, any effect on the health or birth weight of newborn babies, and any mental health issues as a result of the mine fire.

Short term health impacts:

There was also concern that the short term impacts such as sore throat, eyes and skin problems were not being acknowledged and that they may develop into more serious long term illnesses.

Psychological impacts:

The other area of concern was the psychological impacts on the community, especially on the elderly, young, disabled and disadvantaged, and on those who care for them.

It was suggested that children who were relocated should be included, as well as those who stayed in the smoke and ash for a prolonged period.

Additional suggestions:

The impact on animals and plants was raised as a concern by a few individuals.

Who should be included in the study?

People who both work and live in Morwell, as well as the surrounding areas should be included.

If a control (or comparison) group is used, they need to be from a similar area, but not part of the Latrobe Valley.

The participants needs to represent the community so they need to include the elderly, young, disabled, those with a previous health condition as well as those who were well before the fire and people from a non-English speaking background.

How will the study be conducted?

A lot of questions were raised about the design of the study. The study will be conducted by an independent research body with the proven expertise and experience needed to conduct a study of this nature. They will propose their study methods as part of their application.

A range of commonly used methods may be used including:

- access to databases and registries (eg Cancer registry, Latrobe Regional Health data, Birth, Deaths and Marriages data)
- Surveys (phone, face to face, online)
- Health assessments and follow up
- Use of comparison populations

The researchers will need to bring a range of expertise including social science, psychology, medical and environmental science.

The community was also concerned that the study be properly funded so that it can be complete.

How long should it take?

The Department is requesting that the study run for a minimum of 10 years (10 years is the maximum length of time for a government contract). The Chief Health Officer supports community feedback that the study should go well beyond 10 years to properly measure any possible health impacts.

What should happen with the results?

When the study is over, the results of this study will be released by the Chief Health Officer and made publically available on the department's website. As this is a ten year study, the community felt that regular updates on progress should be provided at least every year.

If any results or any new issues are identified, they should be provided to both the community and local health care providers immediately and not wait for an annual report. This will ensure the right care is provided as soon as possible.

What other issues were raised?

The community remain concerned about the content of the smoke and ash particularly as claims have been made that they contain cancer causing elements.

The EPA xxx(something about we didn't find anything but monitoring is continuing)

What are the next steps?

Advertising for a suitable research organisation will be followed by a careful selection process. More work will be done on the study design and like all research, this will need to be approved by a human research ethics committee. This will ensure that the study is conducted in the best interests of the community.

I was unable to attend the sessions, how can I give feedback?

There is an online survey at www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood for Morwell residents to complete.

I'm concerned about my health, who can I talk to?

For any concerns about your health, see your doctor or call Nurse-On-Call on 1300 60 60 24. If the matter is urgent, contact 000 or your local emergency department.

Where can I get more information about this study?

Updates relating to this study will be provided on the Department of Health website at www.health.vic.gov.au/hazelwood.

This will include contact details for the researchers once they are appointed.

Authorised by the Victorian Government, Melbourne.
Last updated: 9 May 2014.