

EPA Inquiry Submission from Voices of the Valley Inc.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Environment Protection Authority Inquiry.

Voices of the Valley Inc. is a community based advocacy group, formed during the Hazelwood Mine Fire of 2014. Its particular interests in this inquiry are twofold: monitoring of air quality in the Latrobe Valley; and timely communication to the public about air quality and other issues and risks.

The people of Latrobe Valley felt let down by the Environment Protection Authority in February 2014 when the Hazelwood Mine Fire burned for 45 days, engulfing the surrounding towns in foul smelling smoke and ash. While we believed that the EPA was supposed to protect the community, instead we felt that it had protected the Mine Operators and had failed to inform the community. Questions, asked by residents of surrounding towns, about the content of the smoke, the carbon monoxide levels and the levels of airborne pollution, either went unanswered, or answers were significantly delayed because of lack of reliable data.

In the early stages of the fire, when we were being told by public officials that only people in 'at risk' categories needed to take precautions, we found that the EPA was not equipped to monitor the air quality in this emergency. The Department of Health relied on EPA data to reassure the population that our health was not at risk, but the data were inadequate. Nor did the EPA have the authority to alert the community about what was in the air. Evidence to the subsequent Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry revealed that the EPA, with other Government agencies, had changed the level of pollutants considered safe to breathe. In the absence of clear information from the EPA about what was in the coal fire smoke, residents of the area felt forced to carry out their own research, and to explore the possibility of obtaining their own means of monitoring air quality. It is the right of all people to know what is in the air, water and soil and to be able to protect our own families. Long term residents of the Latrobe Valley, who knew of the level of air quality monitoring and the positioning of monitors that used to exist in the area, drew the community's attention to the deficiencies of reliance on a very small number of fixed monitors to gather adequate data about air quality across a wide area. It became evident that the EPA, like other responsible bodies, was not prepared for the catastrophe and was scrambling to obtain equipment and collect and interpret data, thus having very little capacity to inform the community of risks we faced.

We feel that Latrobe Valley should be classed as a special zone for air monitoring. While we continually hear that the air in Latrobe Valley is good (or better than air quality in Melbourne), we are sceptical of how that can be confirmed when there are so few monitors and those are not really well placed. Most days we can see pollution coming out from the mines sitting under the inversion layer that holds the pollution in. If at the times visibility is limited (a crude measure of air pollution), we can look at the EPA website which often will show good quality air. Many members of the community have lost trust in the EPA monitoring, as the perception is that these monitors are placed so that they only monitor what is coming from the mines when the air is blowing a certain way.

Mortality statistics show an average life expectancy for people of the Latrobe Valley of approximately 5 years less than people living in other areas of Victoria and the morbidity is much higher than other areas, especially in respiratory illnesses. For too long, people of the Latrobe Valley

have accepted that some illnesses are an inevitable cost of working in coal mines and power stations and living in an area ringed by these industries.

Voices of the Valley wishes to make the following points:

- The Environment Protection Authority must have the power to inform the community of possible health impacts from industrial, fire and Hazmat incidents without waiting for approval from other agencies.
- EPA needs to have authority to alert the public to incidents on their website without waiting for industry to inform the public (for instance, the slurry spill at Yallourn in March 2015).
- EPA needs to have the equipment to attend and monitor emergencies.
- As Latrobe Valley is an area surrounded by large industry and brown coal mines, EPA should have permanent monitors installed across Latrobe Valley to monitor the air and should live stream to a website so members of the community are clearly informed.
- There needs to be tightening of legislation to mandate a compulsory air monitoring regime and a compulsory emissions reporting regime.
- EPA needs the authority to go into mines and large industry without notice to ensure that standards are being met at all times.
- EPA needs greater power in assessing environmental risks at a planning stage, not just in relation to immediate risks but also in relation to environmental justice, health impacts, climate change and environmental degradation.
- Until recently, it is clear that the primary responsibility of the EPA has been to regulate, test and report to government. We believe there should be greater weight given to informing the public about environmental issues.
- We believe the Environment Protection Authority must be given greater responsibility, and thus greater power and more resources, to oversee and manage the environment we all live in.