

Victoria has been let down by the EPA in recent years, as staff numbers have been pruned by successive governments, and their power has been diminished through changes in regulation. This was clearly evident during the recent Hazelwood Mine Fire with inadequate reporting of air quality and strange advice given via Dr Rosemary Lester that things were OK whilst I sat in my house with ash raining down. After it was all over, The EPA stated that there was no grounds on which to charge GDF Suez with any offence, despite unfiltered coal fire smoke being emitted for 45 days.

What is needed is strong regulation (with penalties), backed by adequate resources including qualified staff, to enable Victoria to feel assured that our environment is being protected as initially intended by the original legislation, with mandated annual reporting to Parliament. Increased interaction with the public could be achieved by, for example, regular reporting of live data and air quality, chemical use and disposal guidelines, a pollution hotline with follow-up, and the Citizen Science program. A pollution hotline would hopefully have resulted in quicker action in 2013, when one million litres of benzene was spilt at the Esso Longford plant and not reported for 10 days. A neighbouring farmer and his family suffered ill-health and the farmer now has cancer, yet Esso did not suffer any penalty.

There are many challenges to be met in the future. Foremost is climate change and EPA can play its part by ensuring that gas and coal-fired power stations meet at least the minimum emission targets. Self reporting is not the best method to do this. Other air quality issues arise from industry, fires (bushfire and other), farming and transport.

As a society, the amount of waste seems to increase year by year. A 'whole of life' approach to goods and packaging is needed to recover what is otherwise sent to landfill or washed into the waterways and oceans. Systems in use overseas include thermal depolymerization, pyrolysis, biogas and plasma gasification. These low emission systems allow recovery of resources, thereby avoiding the requirement to find new sources. The EPA should have the ability to guide the direction of the waste/recycling industry.

The EPA has a clear role in monitoring our waterways and preventing issues downstream, such as pollution of the Latrobe River when additional discharge was permitted after incursion from the Morwell River. It was reported that a large number of cattle downstream had died after drinking the river water. The river is quite turbid and may be responsible for silting which occurs in the Gippsland Lakes. Additionally the chemical and animal waste from farming should be closely monitored in the waterways.

The EPA should work in conjunction with other government bodies to assess planning application and extension of housing into farmland.

There is much work to be done as the population increases and EPA need the regulatory framework and staff to keep us and the environment safe. Who else will do this?

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