



CLIMATE AND
HEALTH
ALLIANCE

MEDIA RELEASE

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Answers needed re health of smoke affected community in Morwell

A thorough investigation of the health risks from the coal mine fire in Victoria's Latrobe Valley is needed, the national coalition of health groups, the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA), said today.

The fire adjacent to the coal fired electrical power station at Hazelwood has been burning for over a month, with smoke, dust and ash showering local communities with a mix of toxic pollutants and particulates.

The fire is now being described as under control, but the smoke continues, and people who are particularly at risk of health effects associated with the pollution are still being advised to stay away.

CAHA Convenor Fiona Armstrong said the community's acute exposure to extraordinarily high levels of pollutants known to be harmful to human health should prompt a thorough investigation into the effects of the fire on the health of the local community.

"The community are entitled to know the nature and extent of health risks posed by this fire which has exposed the communities of Morwell, Traralgon and surrounding regions to air pollution containing toxins, including carcinogens, for over a month."

"In addition to standardised assessments of people presenting with symptoms of illness, a detailed study of the entire community should be undertaken to assess the short and long term effects on residents' health from exposure to the coal mine fire," Ms Armstrong said.

CAHA said health monitoring of the entire community should commence immediately, but should be accompanied a comprehensive longer term study.

The health investigation should also consider how the current acute exposure to harmful substances from the fire relates to the ongoing exposure of the community to pollution from the coal mine and coal-fired power station, Ms Armstrong said.

"These acute health risks for the local community come on top on longer term exposures to pollutants, and while the health risks to the local community from the coal mine fire must be the immediate priority, this incident should provide a trigger to investigate the risks from long term exposure to coal pollution."

A separate inquiry should be undertaken to investigate how the fire occurred and whether the government and the coal company were fully prepared should it occur, CAHA said. This should also investigate whether the government's health monitoring

and public health warnings have been adequate.

"There are many questions to be answered about how this fire was allowed to develop in the way it did; why it was not prevented through proper rehabilitation of the former coal mine site; why there were not adequate sprinkler systems in place to extinguish it quickly; and why there was no government regulation in place to ensure all these things occurred," Ms Armstrong said.

These issues, along with the adequacy of the government's response to the health risks faced by the community, should be the subject of a judicial inquiry, CAHA said.

"Are the communities in the Latrobe Valley facing health threats that could have been prevented?" Ms Armstrong asked.

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