FIRE DANGER RATING

LOW-MODERATE · HIGH · VERY HIGH · SEVERE · EXTREME · CODE RED

Image source *Keith Pakenham, CFA Pix*

# PART FIVE
# COMMUNICATIONS

# 5 COMMUNICATIONS

## OVERVIEW

This Chapter examines the way in which government agencies and GDF Suez managed their public communications during the Hazelwood mine fire. Detailed analysis of key communication responses by each of the main government agencies is undertaken in previous chapters. This Chapter considers the overall effectiveness of crisis communication methods employed during the Hazelwood mine fire.

Under its Terms of Reference, the Board of Inquiry must inquire into and report on the measures taken by GDF Suez, emergency services and other relevant government agencies in respect of the health and wellbeing of communities affected by the mine fire, including how those communities were informed about the fire's effects and risks.

The Country Fire Authority, the Environmental Protection Authority, the Department of Health, and the Latrobe City Council and a number of community organisations provided information to the community about the mine fire and its effects. Limited information was provided by GDF Suez.

The Board of Inquiry engaged two independent communications experts, Professor James Macnamara, Professor of Public Communication at the University of Technology, Sydney, and Mr Lachlan Drummond, Consultant, Research and Strategy Lead at Redhanded Communications, to review communication during the Hazelwood mine fire. These experts advised the Board on best practice and principles relating to emergency communication, and communication in the context of rural and regional communities. The research and opinions of these independent experts have helped to inform this Chapter of the report.

The Board heard considerable feedback through the community consultation process, public submissions and evidence at public hearings, pointing to significant shortcomings by government authorities as well as GDF Suez in communicating during the emergency. Throughout the 45 days that the fire burned, members of affected communities felt they were not listened to and were not given appropriate and timely information and advice that reflected the crisis at hand and addressed their needs.

The Board acknowledges that all government agencies worked under a great deal of pressure to try to ensure that the community received appropriate information. The Board commends:

- the Fire Services Commissioner, the Country Fire Authority and other emergency services for their communication with the community during the Hazelwood mine fire

- the Latrobe City Council for undertaking a door knock of the entire town of Morwell, covering some 6,400 homes during the event, as well as the efforts of those from Councils as far away as Ararat who volunteered their time to assist with this door knock

- those from Morwell Neighbourhood House, Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation, Asbestos Council of Victoria and Gippsland Asbestos Related Diseases Support Inc., and other community organisations for their efforts during the Hazelwood mine fire in keeping their community as informed and connected as they could under the circumstances

- those residents responsible for the establishment of Voices of the Valley and their efforts to keep their community informed

- the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC Radio) for keeping the community informed during the fire.

Unfortunately, communication responses overall did not reflect international best practice for crisis communication. The community experienced some of the messages from government as confusing and conflicting. Communication did not reach many people in a timely way and in some cases, not at all. Communication was largely one-way with information being transmitted, but not received or understood by the intended recipients. An over-reliance on digital technology, particularly early on, hindered the ability to reach all community members. Empathy was also often lacking, particularly from some government spokespeople. GDF Suez's communication response was particularly deficient.

## COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS

In his report to the Board, independent communications expert Professor James Macnamara, Professor of Public Communication at the University of Technology, Sydney, outlined the elements of effective crisis communication.

Professor Macnamara told the Board that communicating effectively is a central requirement of crisis management and should be prioritised along with the technical management of the emergency at hand.[1] The approach to communication in a crisis can mean the difference between effectively managing an emergency situation (through gaining the trust and support of those affected), and increasing distrust, anger and anxiety in the community.

### TYPES OF CRISIS

Professor Macnamara cited the Institute for Crisis Management and specialist crisis researcher Otto Lerbringer, in identifying seven different types of crisis:

1 Natural crises such as earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, and accidental fire, often described as 'acts of God'.

2 Technological failures such as the nuclear power plant disaster at Chernobyl, the US Challenger spacecraft explosion, and the BP Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster, as well as other mechanical and technical failures, such as power blackouts, telecommunications network crashes, and shipping collisions, groundings or sinkings.

3 Confrontation crises such as activist attacks, union strikes, or consumer black-bans.

4 Crises caused by malevolence, such as terrorism or sabotage enacted against an organisation or society.

5 Crises caused by systemic issues such as management values and ethics that lead to unsafe practices (eg 'cutting corners' to save costs).

6 Crises caused by deception, such as cover-ups of risks or faults.

7 Crises caused by management misconduct such as fraud, sexual harassment, insider trading, or failure to adhere to standards and regulations.[2]

The cause of a crisis is significant in determining a crisis communication strategy.[3]

Professor Macnamara explained that in the first four categories of crisis identified by Lerbringer, where there is no fault on the part of any organisations involved, there is often a degree of sympathy and public understanding towards those organisations. In contrast, in the fifth, sixth and seventh types of crisis identified above, when the organisation is at fault in some form or another, there is little or no public or political sympathy for the organisation, and often great distrust and antipathy is directed towards it.[4]

Professor Macnamara emphasised that: 'crises have a way of never staying within one of those categories and crises can evolve and emerge, and I think this happened in this case where it started out as a bushfire, which might be a natural crisis, but then turned into a mine fire and then evolved onwards.[5]

Independent communications expert Mr Lachlan Drummond, Consultant, Research and Strategy Lead at Redhanded Communications, expanded on this feature of the Hazelwood mine fire in his evidence to the Board:

I think what happened here was a crisis that started as a bushfire but could probably be more accurately characterised as a chronic technological disaster or a disaster that led to long-term health and anxiety impacts for the local community. So what started as a bushfire in fact evolved into something akin to a chronic technological disaster. The literature on chronic technological disasters, though somewhat out of the scope of this report, talks about and has a whole range of ways of dealing with these sorts of issues. The reason I cited chronic technological disasters in this report is that I think that's a more accurate classification of the nature of the problem that these affected communities were dealing with.[6]

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**CHRONIC TECHNOLOGICAL DISASTERS**

Technological or manmade disasters are non-natural disasters that often occur near human settlements. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies defines technological hazards or disasters as:

Danger originating from technological or industrial accidents, dangerous procedures, infrastructure failures or certain human activities, which may cause the loss of life or injury, property damage, social and economic disruption or environmental degradation.[7]

Time (the speed of onset and duration) often distinguishes technological disasters from natural ones. Unlike a natural disaster, there is no acute moment of terror followed by a defined sequence of rescue, relief and recovery. Technological disasters are more often protracted or 'chronic' events, as distinct from the episodic nature of natural disasters. Chronic Technological Disasters are also known as CTDs. CTDs are not new but they are becoming more common as human settlement crosses paths with industrial and related activity.

At the onset of a CTD, when the hazard is identified, there is also an acknowledgement that danger may be prolonged. In the case of a coal mine fire, the first and foremost problem is stopping the fire. The official response therefore is often less concerned about community relief and rehabilitation. There is also a great reliance on state and commonwealth agencies to provide technical help in dealing with the hazard at hand. People can be left feeling 'in limbo' when danger, risk and health effects are being considered. An appreciation of the human element and how reactions may manifest at this time is important.

Each disaster has some commonalities yet CTDs show that expected human responses are not always apparent. Rather, there are different human responses to this type of disaster. Generally, people are better at responding and adapting to natural disasters than CTDs, where knowledge is more limited, particularly in relation to social, physical and psychological factors that constitute the public response (LaPlante & Kroll-Smith, 1989, pp. 134–150).

## TIMELINESS

Crisis communication research and international best practice literature advocates that crisis communication planning should begin long before a crisis occurs.[8] Mr Drummond and Professor Macnamara explained to the Board that crisis communication is less effective when it is executed 'on the run' when a crisis is already underway.[9]

Timeliness of communications was a significant issue of concern for the Latrobe Valley community during the Hazelwood mine fire. Professor Macnamara made the following comment to the Board on this point:

…I do find it very surprising that there wasn't a communications strategy, they were actually writing it, and it was distributed on 24 February. That seems, given that this mine's been here a long time, to me it would be reasonable to think that there could be a problem. Why wouldn't we have a community engagement and communication strategy in place years ago?[10]

Mr Drummond endorsed this statement by noting that: '…writing it [a communications strategy] on the run doesn't strike me as best practice'.[11]

## DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Mr Drummond explained to the Board that the effectiveness of a communication method in informing or creating behaviour change is also determined by how well the chosen method resonates with the target audiences' values. The Morwell region, like any community, required tailored communications that took into account particular social and demographic features.[12]

The demographic data on inner regional Australia provides a rationale for the values that resonate with regional Australians. Values of higher prevalence in regional areas of Australia include high community

orientation, Australian loyalty, traditionalists and political cautiousness. Mr Drummond reported to the Board that these need to be understood clearly, before an event such as the Hazelwood mine fire, in order to develop suitable communications for regional areas.[13]

Overlaying regional values are those values and characteristics specific to the Morwell community. These include a higher than Victorian average of being born in Australia or having both parents born in Australia, a higher than Victorian average of smaller households, a higher than Victorian average of retirees, a higher proportion of people classified as 'blue collar' workers, a higher than Victorian average of low income households and higher levels of unemployment.[14]

As Mr Drummond explained:

> In this case I would have thought that it would be standard practice, or perhaps best practice, to be prepared by understanding the demographic and social characteristics of the community, say of Morwell and the immediate surrounds. I would have thought it would be critical and important to build contacts in advance of any crisis, contacts within the community, community leaders, develop networks, have relationships with editors and publishers of the local paper, and in effect build a team that, in the event of a crisis you can rally quickly…[15]

Those responsible for coordinating communications during the mine fire were only provided with demographic data on Morwell on 17 February 2014 (nine days into the fire) and acknowledged that Morwell, as a particular audience, should have been taken into account in advance of developing the communications strategy.[16]

In his statement to the Board, Mr Craig Lapsley, Fire Services Commissioner, commented that initially one thing that was not done well was making use of established local community engagement structures and networks.[17]

## COMMUNICATION MEDIUMS

During a crisis, the timeliness, reach and impact of information are dependent on the appropriateness of the communication medium.

Mr Drummond reported to the Board that he believed there was an initial over-reliance on electronic communications to inform the community during the mine fire. Mr Drummond reported that regional and metropolitan audiences do not differ greatly in terms of digital uptake and usage. Accordingly, it was fair to expect in the first instance that electronic communication would be as effective in the Latrobe Valley as in a metropolitan area. However, other characteristics of a population are better predictors of digital uptake and usage, including age, ethnicity, income and education. In this case, the demographic profile of the Morwell community indicated a need to use a broader array of communication mediums.[18]

Mr Lapsley commented on this generally in his evidence to the Board:

> …we default very quickly to websites and think by publishing a "www" address that everyone will go there. That's not the case and I think we're too quick to default to websites although they're important … and if we are going to default to websites or the internet, using places like the neighbourhood house is a classic example that that's where people go to get information and they go there sometimes to access the information or to be supported on how to use the information… [the information] might be electronic, but you'll be supported in how you access and use it.[19]

Mr Drummond reported to the Board that:

> The communications that appeared to work best were those that were what we might call more traditional or grassroots communication such as the face-to-face contact, door knocks organised by Latrobe City Council. ABC Radio was particularly important to the community.[20]

> …Handouts and leaflets, another example of good communications, and then some specific individuals… So, in summary, examples of good communications in this crisis, particularly to this community, it may not apply to all, were typically grassroots and through more traditional channels.[21]

The Board also heard evidence from Professor Macnamara that social media could have been used more smartly by government agencies during the Hazelwood mine fire. Professor Macnamara told the Board that government use of social media was largely restricted to one-way communication rather than working in partnership with the community and generating a sense of dialogue.

He pointed out that traditional media tends to be more one-way and that social media has the potential to be a 'listening medium' not just a 'transmission medium', however too often social media is not used to its full potential.[22] Professor Macnamara agreed with Counsel Assisting that there is more to using social media than 'just posting information'.[23]

In his report to the Board, Professor Macnamara drew upon examples of international best practice in relation to government agencies using social media during crises such as the Boston Marathon Bombing in 2013 and the Queensland Floods in January 2011.

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**THE BOSTON MARATHON BOMBING 2013[24]**

Twitter proved to be the quickest and most reliable communication medium for the Boston Police Department to communicate with the community, media and other key government agencies.

The Boston Police Department's Twitter account went from 54,000 followers to over 330,000 following the crisis. Twitter communication reached 49 million people in only five days.

The Boston Police Department only had three police officers and three civilian staff handling communications during the crisis. Importantly, all had received social media communication training including writing Facebook and Twitter posts in addition to more traditional media and public communication statements. This was supported by a crisis communication plan that included social media.

Twitter was considered a valuable and essential communication tool that helped the Boston Police Department manage their communication by enabling them to 'connect directly with the community.' This approach 'built a cohesive community, reduced panic, engaged the public in the search for suspects, and kept people safe.'

Journalists following the Boston Police Department Twitter account quoted directly from its tweets on live radio and TV broadcasts.

When the Boston Police Department announced a news conference via Twitter, the mistake was quickly corrected. Conversely, when several news outlets incorrectly reported that a suspect was in custody, the Boston Police Department corrected this via Twitter. Fast correction of misinformation is one of the benefits of using social media during a crisis.

The Boston Police Department also tweeted images such as photos of the suspects which thousands of followers retweeted to their social networks and which assisted in their capture.

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**THE JANUARY 2011 QUEENSLAND FLOODS**[25]

The Queensland Floods of January 2011 affected large parts of south-east Queensland and inundated some 30,000 homes. The Twitter hashtag #qldfloods very quickly became a central site on social media for information in a rapidly evolving event. Key government agencies such as the Queensland Police (which has its own Twitter account) quickly adopted the #qldfloods hashtag.

The use of social media by government authorities showed that Twitter offered 'exceptionally flat and flexible communicative structures' that allowed the public to listen in to institutions, news outlets and other individuals, whilst also allowing 'institutions, emergency services and journalists to listen in to the experiences of locals in the midst of the crisis.'[26]

Twitter allows links to be included in short tweets, enabling messages to be sent quickly with a link to longer documents containing detailed information, including emergency plans and advice.

## TONE AND STYLE

Tone and style are particularly important aspects of crisis communication. As Mr Drummond reported to the Board:

> …in order for an affected community to identify with communicators, it is critical that such people exhibit empathy, genuineness and concern. Speakers that are 'wooden', bureaucratic and too 'on message' are likely to be rejected. This means acknowledging the crisis quickly, with sincerity and exhibiting a willingness to engage and help. Failure to adequately 'speak the language' and use the channels of the community will lead to poor, piecemeal and ultimately deficient communications.[27]

Mr Drummond emphasised to the Board that the ability to recognise whether or not you are received empathetically is crucial:

> People in a crisis need to feel validated, they need to feel that their anxieties are being listened to, being heard, and so empathy and understanding is a critical tool in validating people's emotional state in a crisis; that is to say, we hear you, we understand where you're coming from and therefore we know how to help you in the best possible way. So it's not an admission of guilt or liability, it's really saying, we understand you, we empathise with you and, in so doing, it builds trust and I'd argue that trust is the cornerstone of crisis communications.[28]

## INFORMATION VERSUS COMMUNICATION

Professor Macnamara told the Board that information transmission is not the same as communication:

> …information is not communication and it's a common misunderstanding. Communication, in simple terms is about the information that arrives and is understood in the mind of the audience, it's about interpretation and meaning-making… I think throughout this there was a lot of information, but at the end of the day the community had fears that were not addressed and had concerns that were not addressed, so this information had not turned into meaning and interpretation within the community… if it's one-way it's not communication, it's information transmission.[29]

## APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION DURING THE MINE FIRE

### STATE COORDINATION

During a crisis, the Emergency Management Joint Public Information Committee (EMJPIC) is a coordinating committee for emergency communications.[30] The EMJPIC is not the public face of an emergency—this is the role of spokespeople from various government departments. During an emergency, the Chair of the EMJPIC attends State Emergency Management Team meetings.[31]

Ms Merita Tabain, Chair of the EMJPIC, described the purpose of the EMJPIC as follows:

> The foremost responsibility of EMJPIC is to ensure that public information is coordinated and distributed in a timely and accurate manner to inform and advise community members during a major emergency, as well as ensuring that media needs are met, through a coordinated multi-agency approach.[32]

Each department and government agency also has their own communications team, with the role of spokesperson filled by key office holders. In relation to the Hazelwood mine fire, key spokespeople included Mr Lapsley, Fire Services Commissioner, Dr Rosemary Lester, Chief Health Officer, and Mr John Merritt, former Chief Executive Officer of the Environment Protection Authority (EPA).[33] Other state and local government representatives also made public statements and participated in press conferences.

Figure 5.1 shows how the EMJPIC linked to the broader emergency management structure responding to the Hazelwood mine fire.

**Figure 5.1 Operational communications structure for the Hazelwood mine fire** [34]
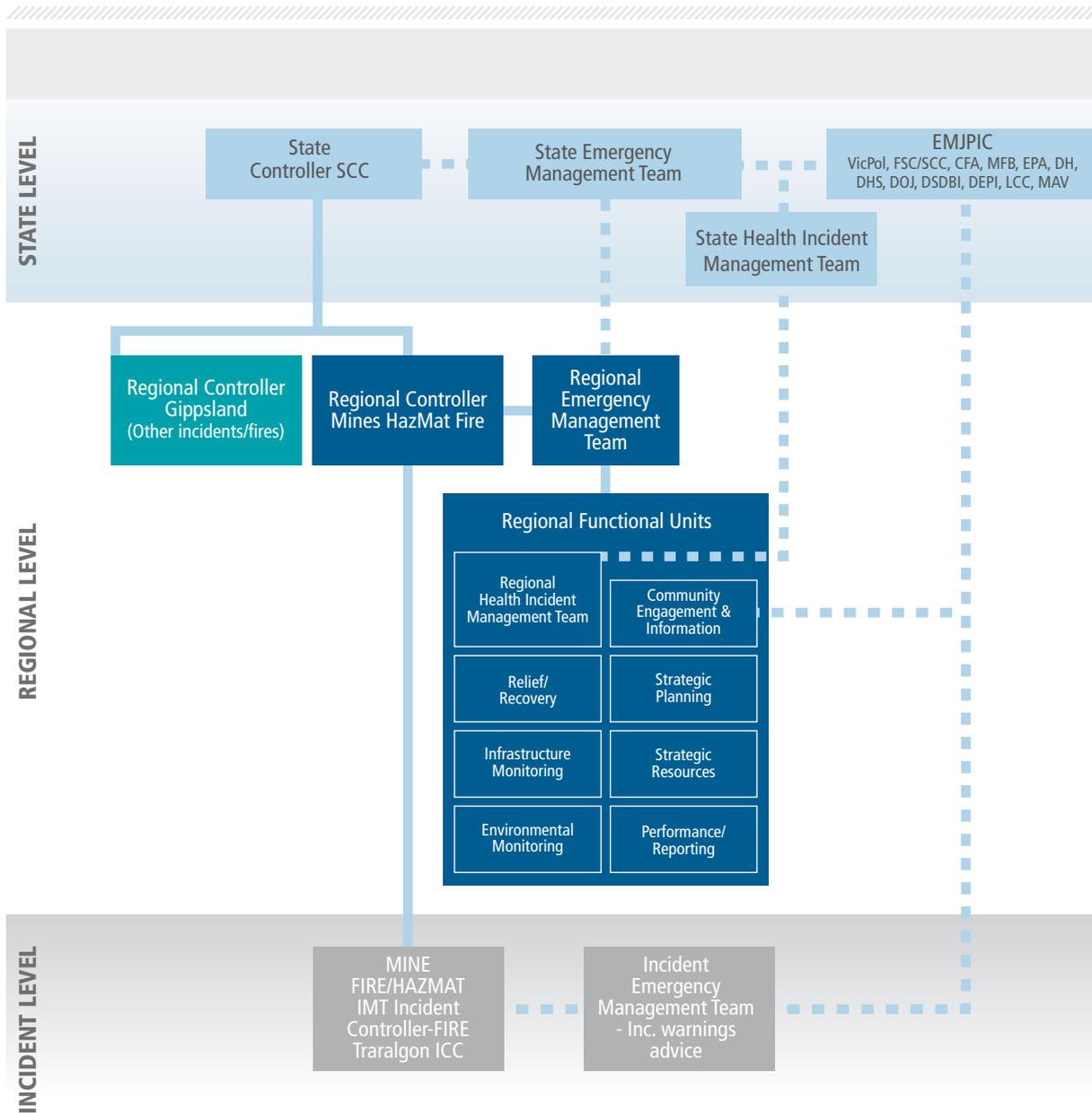


## STATE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

A government communications strategy was developed by the EMJPIC in response to the Hazelwood mine fire.[35] On 16 February 2014 (a week after the fire started), a draft 'Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy' was provided to Mr Lapsley and Incident and Regional Control Centre leadership teams.[36] This strategy was further developed as the crisis continued.

In a version of the 'Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy' dated 24 February 2014, the following communications principles were outlined:

- 'If you know it, tell the community' should be the approach for communication at all times

- ensure internal as well as external communication is maintained at all times

- target communication to individual communities needs and structures

- Incident Control Centres will utilise the systems available to them to ensure that appropriate warnings will be issued including text messages, social media and pre-recorded phone calls

- ask the community how best to engage with them

- where possible utilise local people to engage with local people

- consult with relief and recovery agencies when developing messages to support relief and recovery efforts

- Incident Management Teams will utilise all available technology and local contacts to alert relevant communities in the event that the risk increases

- use a range of key communications (eg media communication with the Latrobe Valley community) during the Hazelwood mine fire.[37]

In her evidence to the Board, Ms Tabain stated her opinion that the communications focus in the first week (up until the weekend of 15 and 16 February 2014) was very much on the fire and the mine:

…really that first week of the fire, from my perspective and from EMJPIC's perspective, the issue of smoke and health and wellbeing of the community really wasn't an issue that was raised. For us, this is advice provided to us, it seemed the issue really was around the fire in the mine, and the threat to power supply… That weekend that's referred to, that is really when things started to shift and everyone understood that this is actually something different, and it's more than just a fire within a contained space, which is the understanding that we had.[38]

In his report, Mr Drummond stated that this characterisation of the crisis influenced how authorities reacted to it, that is, because the mine fire started as a bushfire, communications associated with a bushfire were deployed.[39] The communications strategy initially drew upon the joint EPA and Department of Health Bushfire Smoke Protocol, which is aimed at raising community awareness (particularly for at-risk-groups) during bushfire events that are generally small in size, scale or duration.

Mr Lapsley told the Board that the State Emergency Management Team adopted a 'one source one message' policy in relation to communicating with the community about the mine fire. He explained that: 'one source, one message has been driven by the 2009 fires, so it's had a very strong fire overlay, easy to adopt in other hazards, particularly in the natural hazards, so flood, storm.'[40]

Professor Macnamara told the Board that while a single authoritative source of information can work well in an emergency, this situation required consistency of message across different agencies.[41]

Mr Lapsley told the Board that executing the 'one source one message' policy was challenging, in particular ensuring consistent and timely information on different agency websites.[42] He conceded that there needed to be a better understanding of how 'one source, one message' would be used in an emergency that related to human health (not just fire), but maintained that the principle itself is 'solid'.[43]

## KEY COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

From 11 February 2014, the EPA issued the first of a series of smoke advisories. In the following days the Department of Health began issuing the first of a series of health alerts, advisories and community information sheets.[44] The CFA and Fire Services Commissioner issued a series of alerts about the broader context of the bushfire fire season as well as some preliminary communication focused on the Hazelwood mine fire.[45]

On 14 February 2014, the first of two major community meetings arranged by government agencies, was held at Kernot Hall in Morwell. The Incident Controller led this first meeting. Representatives from the CFA, Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB), Department of Health, EPA and Latrobe City Council addressed the

meeting. Representatives from VicRoads and Victoria Police were also in attendance and questions were taken from the floor. Topics covered the nature of fire as a protracted incident, air quality and the impact of smoke on health.[46]

After the community meeting the EMJPIC reported to the State Emergency Management team that:

> The rising number of firefighters who have been treated for carbon monoxide poisoning at the open cut mine has prompted increasing community concerns. This is being exacerbated by fire union claims about unsafe work conditions. EMJPIC is coordinating a comms strategy to reassure the community, and provide advice from Health and the EPA on how to mitigate the effects of the smoke…[47]

Mr Lapsley told the Board that there was a turning point in the incident on 14 and 15 February 2014 when the fire increased in size, which changed the whole strategy.[48]

On 18 February 2014, a second major community meeting arranged by government agencies was held at Kernot Hall, Morwell. As noted in Chapter 4.2 Chronology of events, Ms Tabain stated in her evidence to the Board that there were not enough government representatives present who were senior enough to give definitive answers.[49] A communications officer volunteered to facilitate the meeting, in lieu of a senior government representative.[50] This meeting highlighted the depth of concern within the Morwell community about the fire and the potential effects of the smoke.[51] Mr Lapsley told the Board that it became clear to agencies from this meeting that the community had become increasingly frustrated about what they perceived as deficiencies in communication about 'what the incident really meant.'[52]

Prior to the meeting on 18 February 2014, the State Emergency Management Team recognised that it was important to have experienced and senior members of local government present to support the conduct of community meetings.[53] Ms Tabain was unable to explain to the Board why there were not sufficiently authoritative people at the community meeting on 18 February 2014 to answer questions from the community.

From the third week of the mine fire, a broad range of communication mediums were employed by all government agencies to more effectively engage with the community. This included door knocking by the Latrobe City Council. From 22 April 2014, a communications officer was engaged by Council for a three month period to support community engagement and communications activities.[54]

Web-based information and social media, including, texting, Twitter and Facebook were also used throughout the Hazelwood mine fire. In her evidence to the Board, Ms Tabain acknowledged that the social media command centre that was established on 26 February 2014 (17 days after the fire started), came about too late.[55]

## THE COMMUNITY'S EXPERIENCE

During the community consultations conducted by the Board, the Latrobe Valley community expressed that they felt confused, anxious, disaffected and angry by a lack of information about the mine fire. Members of the community also expressed frustration with the conflicting nature of the advice provided, and the delay in providing advice that was accessible, relevant and meaningful to them.
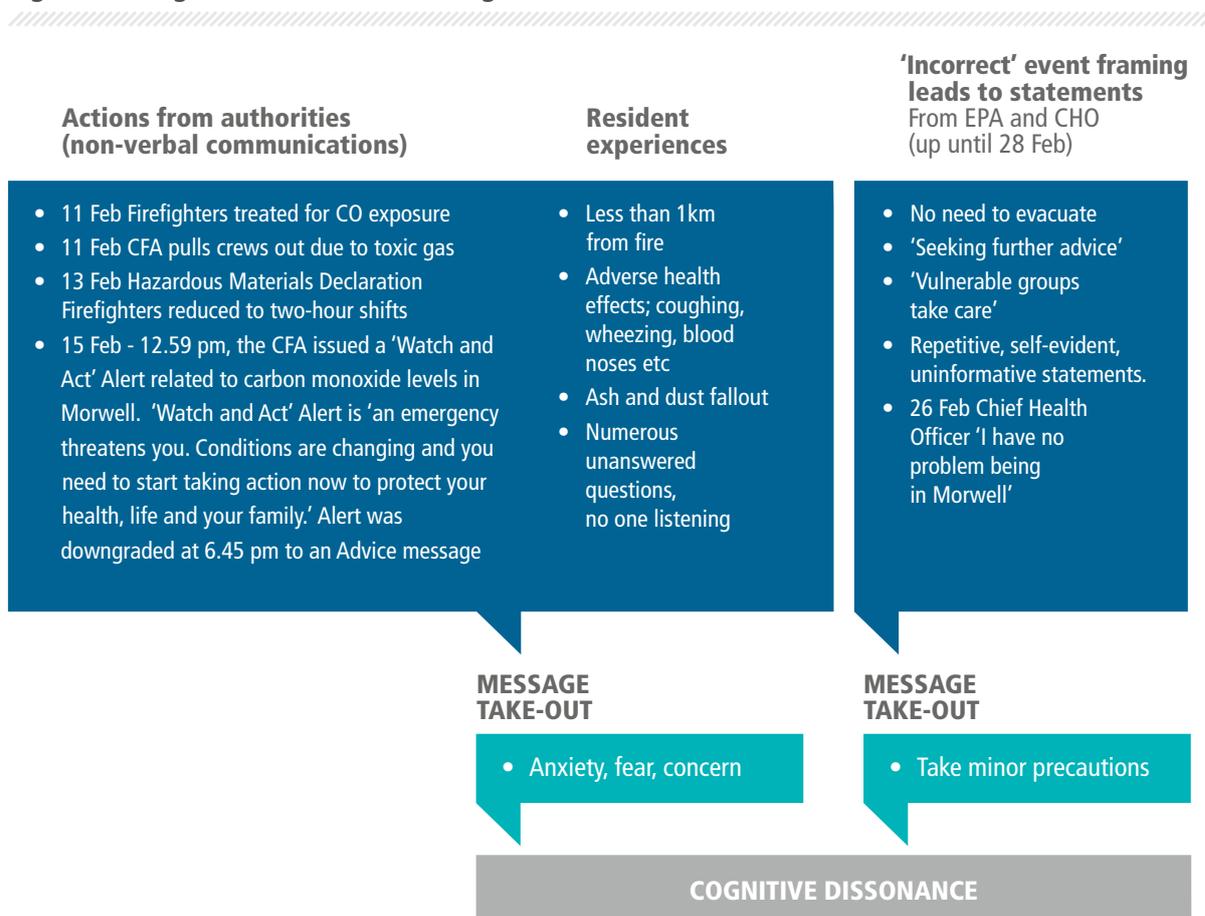
The community told the Board of a 'disconnect' between messages from key authorities and what they were actually experiencing. As Mr Ron Ipsen of Morwell remarked in his submission to the Board: 'The residents of the Latrobe Valley knew that what they were being told was not what they were experiencing.'[56] The community perceived government and agency messaging as confusing, contradictory and lacking credibility.[57]

Mr Drummond told the Board:

> My sense is that throughout this crisis the authorities and individuals, whilst doing their best and working under difficult circumstances, didn't fully appreciate the socio-economic status, the values, the attitudes, and even the needs of the community, and so, what I contend is that there's a disconnect between the communications that were given and what was in fact received.[58]

What the community was experiencing can be described as cognitive dissonance.[59] Cognitive dissonance is explained in Figure 5.2 below.

**Figure 5.2 Cognitive dissonance during the Hazelwood mine fire[60]**

| **Actions from authorities (non-verbal communications)** | **Resident experiences** | **'Incorrect' event framing leads to statements** From EPA and CHO (up until 28 Feb) |
|---|---|---|
| • 11 Feb Firefighters treated for CO exposure<br>• 11 Feb CFA pulls crews out due to toxic gas<br>• 13 Feb Hazardous Materials Declaration Firefighters reduced to two-hour shifts<br>• 15 Feb - 12.59 pm, the CFA issued a 'Watch and Act' Alert related to carbon monoxide levels in Morwell. 'Watch and Act' Alert is 'an emergency threatens you. Conditions are changing and you need to start taking action now to protect your health, life and your family.' Alert was downgraded at 6.45 pm to an Advice message | • Less than 1km from fire<br>• Adverse health effects; coughing, wheezing, blood noses etc<br>• Ash and dust fallout<br>• Numerous unanswered questions, no one listening | • No need to evacuate<br>• 'Seeking further advice'<br>• 'Vulnerable groups take care'<br>• Repetitive, self-evident, uninformative statements.<br>• 26 Feb Chief Health Officer 'I have no problem being in Morwell' |

**MESSAGE TAKE-OUT**
• Anxiety, fear, concern

**MESSAGE TAKE-OUT**
• Take minor precautions

**COGNITIVE DISSONANCE**

Members of the community also reported that lack of coordination among the agencies involved in managing and responding to the mine fire resulted in confusing messages, with agencies appearing to contradict each other. This left affected communities struggling to find the answers and reassurance they were seeking.[61]

An example provided to the Board was the Chief Health Officer's temporary relocation advice on 28 February 2014. Members of the community told the Board that the EPA and the Department of Health issued independent notices about relocation that did not tell the same story as the Chief Health Officer's advice. The Department of Health's notice for temporary relocation, issued just after lunchtime, makes no mention of the EPA, air quality, or where to go to find information on air quality.[62] The EPA's notice, issued at 5.45 pm on the same day, was a high level smoke advisory for the Latrobe Valley and included pre-arranged statements, including from the Chief Health Officer, but with no reference to the temporary relocation advice.[63]

Ms Tracie Lund, Morwell Neighbourhood House Coordinator, told the Board that there was a lot of talking by authorities, but not much listening:

I know that information was being fed up through two government departments, through Council, as much as possible and there did seem to be a lot of hoo-haa'ing up the top, but I do not feel that the community was listened to well and I don't feel that the people on the ground that had the information from the community were listened to very well, and perhaps that's something we can work on in the future, about marrying up the differences between the grassroots and the top heavy, because it could work a lot better if the bottom was included a little bit more I think.[64]

Mr Drummond reiterated this sentiment to the Board:

> In this particular case the opportunity for two-way communications was, I think, severely limited…the community had anxieties and concerns but their ability…to voice those and communicate those concerns to the relevant authorities was minimal.[65]

> In order to fill an information vacuum, many people in the community turned to the internet, including social media, looking for answers, advice and support. This proved to be helpful for some but also added to the confusion for others. Information on the internet about the mine fire was on occasions inaccurate and speculative.[66]

## EMERGENCY SERVICES

During community consultations, the Board heard that emergency services, in particular the CFA provided timely and helpful community information, at a range of levels and through a wide variety of media.[67] From 9 February 2014, the CFA provided community information and warnings through its Fire Ready app, emergency alert text messages, its website and other media channels.[68]

The Board heard that the community considered Mr Lapsley to be forthright, honest and informative in his public statements. The frankness of Incident Controllers at community meetings was also appreciated.[69] As firefighting continued, the CFA was highly visible to the community and implemented a range of face-to-face communication strategies, including at community meetings, through the community information bus and through Morwell Neighbourhood House.[70]

The CFA distributed information electronically but also had a greater physical presence 'on the ground' than other government agencies. The CFA was actively involved in public meetings and mobile van tours, as well as having a significant role in firefighting at the mine.[71]

## HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

A consistent theme throughout community consultations and public submissions was that authorities such as the Department of Health did not communicate effectively with the community. The Chief Health Officer, in particular, was perceived as lacking empathy and compassion. Mr Pat Bartholomuez of Morwell, stated in his public submission that:

> The State's Chief Health Officer meant well when she said the smoke was harmless and that the intensity of the smoke could be measured by visibility without scarce measuring equipment (my words). The people took this as "Shut up, stop whingeing and get on with it." What she could have said was "I know that you are suffering, we have not had a situation like this before and we are carrying out urgent research, how can we help?"[72]

Ms Vicki Hamilton, Chief Executive Officer and Secretary of the Asbestos Council of Victoria (ACV) and the Gippsland Asbestos Related Diseases Support Inc. (GARDS), told the Board that messages from the Chief Health Officer were confusing:

> During the mine fire, the key issue raised by ACV/GARDS members was the lack of communication particularly in regard to the health effects of the fire and smoke. Our members were concerned about the toxicity of the smoke, the short and long-term effects of the smoke, the lack of initial air monitoring and the considerable stress and potential mental health issues arising from the fire. Our members were not able to find the answers to their questions.[73]

> … the Chief Health Officer said that they were treating the fire just like any other bushfire. The community knew that the mine fire was not a bushfire and it was a very different fire with respect to how it was to be treated and what was contained in that fire. The community had no confidence in the authorities because of this message…the Chief Health Officer said that there would be no long-term health effects from the fire. I was confused as to how would she know this as there had been no references made to how she could confidently make that assessment…[74]

The temporary relocation advice given by the Chief Health Officer on 28 February 2014 was seen by many in the community as inconsistent with earlier advice because, within the context of the event overall, it was not clearly explained why temporary relocation was being advised on that particular day, nor why the railway line was the geographic marker for different treatment.

Some in the community interpreted this advice as: 'yesterday was safe enough to stay, the last three weeks were safe enough to stay, but today, it is not safe to stay.'[75]

As described by Ms Annette Wheatland, Gippsland Regional Manager, Southern Cross Care Victoria, who works in Morwell:

> It was a difficult time because for three weeks we were told it was safe to be in Morwell and then suddenly we were told that vulnerable people should relocate. It was hard to understand why only the vulnerable people were being recommended to relocate when we were all being affected by the smoke in Morwell.[76]

In his evidence to the Board, Dr Christopher Brook, State Health and Medical Commander referred to front line services like Ambulance Victoria, Latrobe Valley Hospital and Nurse-On-Call as being the 'arms and legs' of the Department of Health and so by extension, acting as the Department's face-to-face contact with the community.[77] Some members of the community did not feel this way. Ms Lund told the Board that: '…the community did not see the ambulance service as representatives of the Department of Health. There were no people from the Department of Health on the ground with the community and this caused a lot of anger.[78]

Communication between the Department of Health, local general practitioners and health networks is dealt with in Chapter 4.6 Health response.

As detailed in Chapter 4.7 Relief and recovery, the Department of Human Services (DHS) was responsible for managing relocation and respite assistance. Members of the community gave evidence to the Board that they felt the eligibility criteria for relief packages were not adequately explained and that they were unclear about who was eligible for assistance because they were unable to access information and advice from the DHS.[79]

**ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AUTHORITY**

Community consultations, submissions and evidence heard by the Board revealed a high degree of frustration about the EPA's inability to communicate effectively with the community during the Hazelwood mine fire.

In his report, Mr Drummond summarised the community's concerns as follows:

- information was slow to be released

- information was not particularly helpful

- information about the relative safety of the fire, smoke and air did not match the community's experience of adverse health effects

- inability to explain and adequately address concerns

- lack of trust in data and figures, the credibility of the EPA was damaged when they framed their primary responsibility as one of reporting to the Chief Health Officer and not to the community

- information was at times overly simple, repetitive and unhelpful while other communications were complex and not adequately explained.[80]

Early public communication by the EPA downplayed the risks of the mine fire. The EPA's first post on Twitter on 12 February 2014, and several subsequent tweets, advised the public that there was little or no risk to their health. Tweets posted by the EPA on 12 and 13 February 2014 also advised of a 'very low level of carbon monoxide impacts'.[81]

Mr Merritt told the Board that:

> As the incident unfolded, it became clear that more information was required by the community. The challenge was that the next level of information, such as individual test results, started to introduce more complex scientific ideas, principles and concepts, and as such required substantially more explanation and translation into easily understood terms.[82]

Mr Drummond's analysis was that the EPA found itself in a difficult position trying to strike the right balance between providing as much information as possible, while trying to ensure it made sense and was scientifically sound. Whilst some information was too repetitive and basic (such as EPA smoke advisories with template wording), other advice was too complex.[83]

One of the questions posed in a 'frequently asked questions' fact sheet issued by the EPA on 24 February 2014 was: 'The data on EPA's website looks alarmingly as if we've exceeded air quality standards, is that right?' The answer provided in the factsheet was: 'Data readings are the actual scientific measurements for each air pollutant. The data readings are recorded in different units of measure depending on the type of pollutant'. Ms Tabain of the EMJPIC conceded that this was not an example of good communication and that a simple answer to this question would have been 'yes'.[84]

As part of his peer review response to the EPA, Associate Professor Howard Bridgman from the School of Environmental and Life Sciences at the University of Newcastle, reported back to the EPA that answers to many of the questions on the EPA website were 'broad, generic and sometimes vague'.[85] Based on his experience with air pollution in the Hunter Valley in New South Wales, Professor Bridgman noted that:

> …the interested public do not consider these kinds of answers favourably. They want better information. I recommend that the answers to the questions on the website be revisited with the aim to provide some more details and more specifics, but still keeping the answers short, simple and direct.[86]

The EPA's 24 hour telephone line was relied on by many people in the community. Ms Brooke Burke, Morwell Business Owner, gave evidence to the Board that she contacted the EPA by telephone on at least two occasions for information about the impacts of the smoky conditions after the advice by the CFA to close windows and doors.[87] Ms Burke sought advice on whether it was safe to continue running dance classes at her studio:

> I'd contacted the EPA and tried to look for any other places I could contact to find out whether it was safe for us to be there. But it was very hard to find someone that could tell us if we were or weren't (safe). Obviously not being a government agency, we didn't have anyone in direct contact with us as to whether the building was safe to be in.[88]

From 21 February 2014, the EPA had a number of visual representations of the distribution of air pollution on its microsite. However, some key visual representations were not made available to the public, including images of the TravelBLANkET (used to measure particulate levels in the air). Associate Professor Bridgman told the EPA that: 'The spatial display is impressive and easy to understand and should be made available to the public via the dedicated website'.[89]

## LATROBE CITY COUNCIL

Many members of the community expressed to the Board that they found it very difficult to get information from Latrobe City Council during the crisis. Community members acknowledged that the Council was put in a difficult position during the mine fire and that it was under-resourced to respond to the emergency.[90]

The Council usually makes information available on its website about preparing for 'Fire, Floods and Other Emergencies'. Information on fires is mainly related to domestic blazes. The website includes helpful links to relevant specialist agencies such as the CFA, EPA, and the Department of Health.[91]

There was limited information on the Council's website in relation to the Hazelwood mine fire during the period February–March 2014. The Council also made limited used of social media.[92]

In its submission to the Board, the Latrobe City Council described a wide array of government agencies, senior officials and elected representatives involved in communicating to both the Council and the community throughout the event, often at the same time. The Council considered that this reduced effective communication, as information and messaging coming from multiple government agencies was not coordinated or consistent.[93]

The Council also submitted to the Board that it was requested to attend various announcements and press conferences at short notice, often with no clear indication as to what was being announced or what its role was. Not only did this place additional pressure on Council staff, it created confusion in the community

as to what role Council had in response to the Hazelwood mine fire (generally councils are involved in the recovery phase of an emergency, not in the response phase while the event is still taking place).[94]

The Council further submitted to the Board that at other times, announcements by government agencies and authorities that had resource implications for the Council were made without notifying the Council. This meant Council was unable to respond in an appropriate and timely manner. This in turn fuelled anger in the community by raising unrealistic expectations of Council's ability to respond to these announcements and to do so immediately.[95]

Mr Robert Jackman, Morwell resident, explained his experience with the Council in his statement to the Board:

> In the second week after the fire I heard on the radio that Ambulance Victoria had set up a medical assessment centre for members of the community to access. I did not hear the location of the assessment centre so I rang the Latrobe City Council. The person who answered my call did not know anything about the assessment centre. The person put me on hold to find out further information. Upon returning to the call, they told me that it was at the Mid Valley Shopping Centre opposite Katies. I went to that location and there was no medical assessment centre. I eventually found it nearby in Saskia Way, next to the Ambulance Victoria headquarters in Morwell. I thought that there would be a lot of people there but I was the only one. I got checked out and was told I was okay. I was surprised that the Latrobe City Council did not know about the medical assessment centre and I think they should have known what was going on...[96]

Ms Burke also described her experience with the Council during the first week of the fire: 'I contacted the Shire to ask if there was someone to speak to about what local businesses should do. They said there wasn't anyone appointed at this stage.'[97]

In his statement to the Board, Mr John Mitchell, Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Latrobe City Council acknowledged that:

> …there were instances where the call centre, which was staffed with contractors, was not as up to date as it should have been, in the sense that it did not always have all up to date information to hand. In light of this, the Council introduced a new briefing method to increase the knowledge of those at the call centre.[98]

Members of the community also told the Board that they were frustrated with the information provided by the Council relevant to the cleanup package they provided the community. In his report to the Board, Mr Drummond noted that, 'The provision of a clean up package in the form of a bucket, gloves and vouchers was widely derided for being inadequate and lacking any helpful communications on how to approach decontamination.'[99]

**GDF SUEZ**

Communications from GDF Suez were noticeably absent over the 45 days that the mine fire burned.[100]

A spokesperson for GDF Suez, Mr Trevor Rowe, was interviewed on 9 February 2014 by ABC Radio.[101]

GDF Suez provided limited information relevant to the fire on its website. It provided some information through the CFA website, and later during the crisis, it authored full-page articles that appeared in the local paper, the Latrobe Valley Express.[102]

On 20 February 2014 (11 days after the start of the fire) GDF Suez posted a statement on the CFA's website with a series of questions and answers, which included the following sentence: 'We fully understand the inconvenience and concern that the smoke from the fire has caused for people living in surrounding areas.'[103]

In his report to the Board, Professor Macnamara stated: 'Absence is seen as synonymous with silence and is seen very negatively…'[104] Professor Macnamara summed up GDF Suez's public communications strategy as one that could be interpreted as showing disdain for the local community, and at best, showing a lack of sensitivity and concern.[105]

GDF Suez claimed that its communication approach adhered to the State's 'once source, one message' policy.[106]

## MORWELL NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

Morwell Neighbourhood House provides an important local base for people to access information and stay connected to their local community. In times of crisis or emergency, it has an essential role in disseminating information to locals, as well as making contact with those who are not connected to the internet and do not use social media.[107]

In her evidence to the Board, Ms Lund described how she was unable to provide the information and help that people needed, because this information was not available through other channels:

> So the day of the relocation… I was watching on the news for the announcement of what was going to happen, and then I knew we'd get questions, but we were ping-ponging from site to site trying to figure out what was the correct information to give them. So we'd print out what we'd think was the correct information for that day and then later that night or later that day I'd find out that, no, no, it's actually a different number to call or – so it was very difficult and time-consuming to figure out how to get the correct information so that we could have it there to give to the community.[108]

The Neighbourhood House found itself in a situation of being unable to assist members of the community who turned up angry, upset and struggling to find answers.[109]

### INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

The Board heard from Ms Karen Andrew, Youth Suicide Prevention Counsellor with the Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation, which is located at the Central Gippsland Aboriginal Health Service in Morwell. Ms Andrew described the local indigenous community as having a very high level of disadvantage, which includes in some cases three generations of unemployment and lower than average life expectancy (even when compared with other indigenous communities).[110]

Ms Andrew told the Board that information was not specifically made available to the indigenous community, and that no direct contact was made with her organisation from any government agency to inquire what the indigenous community needed. Ms Andrew stated that she was only made aware of information and assistance about the mine fire when she came across a flyer at the Latrobe Community Health Service and set about photocopying it herself for distribution. Ms Andrew attended community meetings from that point on, including those held on 14 and 18 February 2014.[111]

Ms Andrew told the Board that the indigenous community needs face-face contact, as they generally do not have access to or use the internet. Many people in the indigenous community in the Latrobe Valley are also illiterate.[112]

Ms Andrew communicated with the local indigenous community about the Hazelwood mine fire in person. She advised them where they could go for assistance and relocation support. Ms Andrew was particularly concerned for those members of the community who were unwell, such as the elderly and young mothers with small children.[113]

Ms Andrew's evidence is consistent with feedback from the local indigenous community to the Board during its community consultation sessions.

### VULNERABLE GROUPS

The Board heard from a diverse range of community members and organisations, during the community consultation sessions and through public submissions, on how they felt communication was handled during the Hazelwood mine fire.

Many groups – including the elderly, disabled, homeless or displaced, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – as well as those advocating on their behalf, such as Deafaccess Gippsland,[114] felt that communication was not handled well, nor did it meet their particular needs.

### VOICES OF THE VALLEY

Voices of the Valley is a local grassroots community organisation that was established during the Hazelwood mine fire, in direct response to the information vacuum and lack of advocacy the community was experiencing.

In his evidence to the Board, Mr Simon Ellis, former President of Voices of the Valley, explained how the group facilitated public meetings, distributed information via a dedicated Facebook page and coordinated collection of a survey of people's experiences, which was later submitted to the Board of Inquiry.[115]

**ABC RADIO**

The community commended the ABC Radio in eight out of the ten community consultations, singling it out for working particularly well during the crisis.[116]

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### KEY COMMUNICATION ISSUES

The nature of a crisis, emergency or disaster needs to be recognised in order to frame it appropriately. The Hazelwood mine fire went very quickly from a bushfire related event, to an industrial fire (chronic technological event), to a significant and lengthy environmental and health crisis. By 12 February 2014, Mr Lapsley recognised that the Hazelwood coal mine could burn for up to one month,[117] yet the way the crisis was framed in communications planning and delivery did not reflect the true nature of the event or the length of time it was foreseen as running.

The State Emergency Management Team and the EMJPIC acknowledged broader concerns about health and environment on 14 February 2014. However, the scale and importance of these issues was not fully appreciated until sometime after that.[118]

### LACK OF PREPAREDNESS

The State did not have an existing communications strategy to apply to an emergency like the Hazelwood mine fire.[119] It was not until 16 February 2014 (a week after the fire started) that a communications strategy was prepared, and not until 20 February that the document was adopted. The State's Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy appears to have been finalised and distributed on or around 24 February 2014 –15 days after the mine fire started.[120] This was more than a week after the first community meeting, where agencies became aware of the community's need for better communication. This may help explain why community members believed that: 'It took government two weeks to get here, to even start thinking about it.'[121]

The Board accepts the analysis undertaken by Mr Drummond and agrees with his opinion that while the demographic make-up of audiences does not directly determine the effectiveness of communication, it significantly influences how a communication should be developed for an audience. The Board considers that if work similar to this analysis had been undertaken, and completed as part of crisis communication preparation, then the ability of government agencies to respond in an appropriate and timely way would have been much improved. It is imperative that reaching the target audience is done in a timely and appropriate way.

The Board considers that it was unfortunate that the strategy had to be written and executed during the crisis. This demonstrates that preparedness in crisis communication fell short and subsequently undermined the ability of government agencies to respond effectively.

The Board agrees that 'one source, one message' is an important and useful communication principle for bushfire and perhaps some acute emergencies. It may be less useful for a protracted crisis involving a chronic technological or industrial type event where health and the environment become central points of concern. The Board considers the 'one source one message' approach needs to be reviewed for crises that go beyond bushfire.

The first media release in relation to the fire was issued by Latrobe City Council 10 days after the fire started. The first media release from a senior government leader was issued 11 days after the fire started. Other than an interview undertaken by a GDF Suez spokesperson on 9 February 2014, GDF Suez did not issue a media release until 11 March 2014 – 28 days after the fire started.[122]

Government agencies and authorities issued a considerable amount of electronic and print material and engaged in a number of press conferences and community meetings. There was also an acknowledgement after the first week that the initial approach to communications needed to be changed

in order to respond to the particular circumstances of this crisis. In most cases, government agencies understood that their communication strategies needed to be adapted to suit the situation and audience but this did not take place until well into the second and third week. A lack of preparation resulted in an inadequate response in this instance.

During the third week of the crisis, the Latrobe City Council organised a door knock of Morwell residents to inform them of the status of the fire and to discuss health and other concerns.[123] Both the door knock by the Latrobe City Council and the letter drop by the DHS were sensible adaptations to the previous communication strategy, but occurred too late.

## COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The Board accepts Professor Macnamara's view that social media is useful where it facilitates a conversation with the community. Social media can be a very effective tool for hearing and reading what the community are saying and how they are responding, in turn enabling interventions to acknowledge and correct rumour and innuendo.[124]

The Board affirms the use of social media by government agencies and encourages the continued use of this medium. It is an important communication tool to reach many people very quickly. However, other more traditional forms of communication should not be sacrificed or forgotten about and should be used alongside social media in times of crisis.

The Board supports the use of multiple channels of communication that reach the greatest amount of people and best suit the needs of the audience, but notes that traditional mediums were not used readily or early enough. In some instances, digital technology was used by government agencies to the detriment of other forms of communication that could have worked alongside more modern mediums. This was important in the case of the Hazelwood mine fire as the demographic circumstances of the Morwell community are diverse, with high representations of elderly residents, those with low socio-economic status, residents with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, those with limited literacy and those with limited internet access.[125]

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

While electronic communication has the benefit of speed and access, the best form of human communication remains face-to-face. This is particularly the case during a crisis. With the operational and practical pressures of a crisis limiting time and resources for sitting and talking with people, the Board endorses the view held by its two communications experts that key departments and agencies involved in such a crisis should consider the inclusion of community relations specialists in their communications teams. These specialists can be deployed during an emergency or disaster to work with local communities, including previously identified trusted networks, in accessing and interpreting information and acting as an interface between communities and the providers of information and services.[126] In the Board's view, identifying and training community relations specialists well before an emergency or crisis occurs, is essential.

Much of the frustration the community was experiencing was a result of one-way communication, with government authorities and agencies doing much of the telling and talking and not enough listening and local engagement. The information being delivered was often not being received because it was not addressing the specific needs and concerns of the audience—the Latrobe Valley community. While distributing considerable amounts of information to the community, government departments and agencies did not engage to any significant extent in listening to, or partnering with local residents and community groups, which are identified as important strategies in best practice risk and crisis communication.[127] Had this been done soon after the Hazelwood mine fire started, a better understanding of the psychological, cultural, social and physical needs of residents may have been achieved. Local networks could also have been engaged in the task of distributing information.

While many government agencies and authorities provided factual information, the Board accepts the opinion of its two communications experts that the basic human need for empathy, and expressions of concern, care and assurance, were not adequately expressed. Communication was mostly functional, with information packaged in neatly designed templates.

Crisis communication needs to take into account the psychological, sociological and cultural aspects of human communication and these elements were largely overlooked throughout the event.

A good deal of information provided to the community during the Hazelwood mine fire by the State and its agencies did not meet best practice standards in crisis communication, which, in its simplest terms, requires quick, consistent, open and empathetic public communication. As stated by the Latrobe City Council in its written submission to the Board:

> There was a wide array of agencies providing messages to the community from their respective departments but it appeared that at times this was not coordinated or consistent in its approach. Council believes that this created confusion, fear, anger and a lack of trust within the community.[128]

These shortcomings were acknowledged by many, including the Chief Health Officer: 'The community has fed back to us that some people did not hear the messages, some people did not understand the messages, so we need to go back and do a thorough review of our communication strategy…'[129] The Board commends this review as appropriate in the circumstances.

What did work well was face-to-face communications. The clear message from the community received through community consultations, public submissions and evidence provided by community witnesses during the public hearing was that personal, face-to-face contact and open and honest information through community meetings and a door-knock was greatly valued.

## EMERGENCY SERVICES

The Board commends the Fire Services Commissioner, the CFA and other emergency services for their communication with the community during the Hazelwood mine fire. It is unfortunate that other government agencies and authorities were unable to connect and deliver important information and messaging in the way both the Fire Services Commissioner and the CFA did.

The effectiveness of emergency services communication was due in part to the established regard and respect for the CFA. The Board commends the Fire Services Commissioner for effectively engaging with the community, and for his ability to engender trust and support, and genuinely convey empathy while commanding authority.

Although community meetings were integral to the effectiveness of the emergency services' communications during the mine fire, the community meeting held on 18 February 2014 was an exception. In light of the terrible conditions in Morwell over the weekend of 15 and 16 February 2014, more care should have been taken to set up the meeting in accordance with the guidelines for community meetings previously established by the State Emergency Management Team. In particular, the Board considers that this meeting should have been chaired by a skilled and experienced facilitator and attended by senior government agency representatives able to provide authoritative factual information, and to hear the messages and experiences the community were going through.

The only criticism that Professor Macnamara could level at the CFA in his analysis was an over-reliance on web-based information. In the case of the Morwell community, printed hard copies of key fact sheets, and updates would have been a useful addition to its public communication for residents who are not internet and social media users.

## THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AUTHORITY

The Department of Health and the EPA could have been more open and transparent with the public on the development of the Carbon Monoxide Response Protocol and the $PM_{2.5}$ Health Protection Protocol as discussed in Chapter 4.6 Health response. Community trust could have been enhanced by sharing the outcomes of the peer reviews sought from a number of external experts on these important matters.

Sharing this information with the public would have helped in explaining the rationale behind their decision-making and could have helped build community trust and confidence by raising awareness and understanding that the opinions of eminently qualified experts were being sought, and what their advice was.

In a press conference on 26 February 2014, the Chief Health Officer stated that interstate and international experts were being consulted.

However, when asked by the community 'Who are you consulting?' the response was 'I don't want to disclose details of that.'[130] This was in stark contrast to the messaging of the Fire Services Commissioner, who was open about consulting experts.[131]

On the evidence, the Board considers that the Chief Health Officer, as the Government spokesperson for health, did not communicate effectively enough with the Latrobe Valley community. The Board acknowledges that many in the community perceived the Chief Health Officer's communications as lacking in empathy and sincerity. The Board appreciates that there may have been a number of other factors contributing to this, including a level of pre-existing distrust in government in the region. However, the Board does not consider that this distrust accounts for the perceived inadequacy of communication by government agencies and their spokespeople during the Hazelwood mine fire.

The Board acknowledges that the EPA was faced with the challenging task of effectively communicating complex scientific information to a diverse audience who wanted immediate data while also wanting to know what it meant for their health. In particular, in an effort to address this demand, the EPA experienced criticism following the launch and promotion of its microsite for the mine fire on 21 February 2014. The microsite was difficult to access for some and increased expectations, whereby the community sought even more interpretation and advice relating to the information posted.[132]

In trying to understand complex issues such as various types of air pollution, many members of the community who do not have a science background (the majority) required explanation, discussion and a chance to ask questions and clarify information. Effective communication often requires face-to-face meetings and printed information sheets that can be retained and referred to as required.[133] It was poor communication practice by the EPA to publish information sheets that posed, but provided no meaningful answers, or unclear answers, to pressing public health questions.

Additional efforts by EPA staff on the ground to provide face-to-face communication with the community during the event is commended by the Board, although the success of this strategy appeared to be limited from the community's perspective.

The bushfire smoke advisories issued by the EPA and the Chief Health Officer throughout the fire were repetitive, poorly focused and unhelpful, increasingly so as the weeks went by. The bushfire smoke advisories originated from the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires and are template-based documents that exist based on an agreement between the EPA and the Department of Health. They were not seen as helpful during the Hazelwood mine fire, particularly as the fire burned beyond the first week.

The Board accepts the view of its communications experts that the advice should have been better tailored to the actual conditions in and around Morwell and the prolonged nature of the fire. Communication during a crisis needs to be simple, clear and meaningful, using plain language that avoids jargon and acronyms. However, it should not be repetitive or based solely on pre-approved templates only.

Smoke alerts did not provide any information about levels of sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, or other chemical or particle pollutants. The EPA distributed only general information about smoke and notification that it was testing the air quality.

While the Board endorses the use of social media as an important channel for fast communication with internet-connected and social media savvy citizens, there was an over-reliance on internet communications during the crisis by the EPA.

## LATROBE CITY COUNCIL

The Board recognises that Latrobe City Council was placed in a difficult position due to the way communication was dealt with by government agencies and authorities. However, the Council could have improved its online and social media presence to help clarify its role with the community.

The Council's clean up package became symbolic of the inadequacy of Council to communicate effectively with the community.

The Board commends the Council for undertaking a door knock of the entire town of Morwell. In seeking to communicate in person, to ensure people knew what was happening and to find out how people were, some 6,400 homes were attended. This would have been even more valuable had it been done earlier. The Board acknowledges the resource constraints the Council was working under and commends the efforts of those from Councils as far away as Ararat who volunteered their time to assist with this door knock.

## GDF SUEZ

During the 45 days that the Hazelwood mine fire burned, GDF Suez's communications practices fell well short of good communication standards.

The Board accepts the views of the independent communications experts in relation to GDF Suez. In particular, the Board agrees that GDF Suez was 'conspicuous by its absence' regarding public communication throughout the crisis. This included a noticeable absence by GDF Suez at community meetings and media conferences.

International best practice in crisis communication demonstrates that the central company involved in an emergency should be open, honest, quick to respond and act responsibly. GDF Suez did not adopt this approach. GDF Suez did not publicly express its concern other than in a few paid advertisements in the Latrobe Valley Express. The consequence was that the community saw the mine owner and operator as failing it.

The Board considers that adhering to the 'one source, one message' policy of government did not preclude GDF Suez from expressing compassion and empathy by having a physical presence at community engagement meetings and press conferences, or otherwise showing its compassion and concern for the community and the impact the fire had.

The Board considers that GDF Suez in particular, needs to review its crisis communication approach and demonstrate greater concern for the local communities in which it operates and directly affects. The Board affirms the commitment articulated by Mr Steven Harkins, GDF Suez Director of People, Culture and Environment, and Mr George Graham, GDF Suez Asset Manager, to review the GDF Suez communications protocol. The protocol should ensure that during the response to an incident that is capable of impacting on the community, GDF Suez is able to communicate messages to the community effectively.

## COMMUNITY-BASED COMMUNICATIONS

The Board commends those from Morwell Neighbourhood House, the Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation, Asbestos Council of Victoria and Gippsland Asbestos Related Diseases Support Inc., and other community organisations for their efforts in keeping their community as informed and connected as they could under the circumstances.

The Board commends those responsible for the establishment of Voices of the Valley and the actions of this group in disseminating important information to the local community and advocating on their behalf during the emergency.

As well as providing a voice for the community, the formation of Voices of the Valley illustrates the importance of self-help and agency. It also emphasises the important role a community group like this can play not only in advocating on behalf of others but in the potential to partner with government authorities to support effective crisis communication with the community.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCEMENT

The Board notes the communication principles included in the Victorian Emergency Management Reform White Paper and the Victorian Government's new governance arrangements for emergency management in Victoria through Emergency Management Victoria. The Board commends action taken to improve how agencies communicate with communities in emergency situations.

The Board considers that the issues raised by this Inquiry and the recommendations of this report should be reflected in crisis communication policy and procedures within the new emergency management framework. The Board considers that government agencies consider the suggestions for improvement, and that GDF Suez review its crisis communications approach to more effectively engage with the community.

## RECOMMENDATION 11

The State review and revise its communication strategy to:

- ensure all emergency response agencies have, or have access to, the capability and resources needed for effective and rapid public communications during an emergency; and

- ensure, where appropriate, that private operators of essential infrastructure are included in the coordination of public communications during an emergency concerning that infrastructure.

## RECOMMENDATION 12

The State, led by Emergency Management Victoria, develop a community engagement model for emergency management to ensure all State agencies and local governments engage with communities and already identified trusted networks as an integral component of emergency management planning.

## RECOMMENDATION 18

GDF Suez improve its crisis management communication strategy for the Hazelwood mine in line with international best practice.

1.   Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 7

2.   Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 8

3.   Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 8

4.   Macnamara T1272:14-28

5.   Macnamara T1272:23-28

6.   Drummond T1273:22-31; T1274:1-5

7.   International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies n.d., *Types of disasters: Definition of hazard*, IFRC, Switzerland, viewed 25 July 2014, https://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/disaster-management/about-disasters/definition-of-hazard/

8.   Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 9

9.   Drummond & McNamara T1302:3-16

10.  Macnamara T1302:8-14

11.  Drummond T1302:15-16

12.  Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.5.2

13.  Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.5.3

14.  Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.5.3

15.  Drummond T1278:11-21

16.  Tabain T1388:15 – T1389:9

17.  Exhibit 1 – Statement of Craig Lapsley, para. 171

18.  Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.3.4

19.  Lapsley T94:2-15

20.  Drummond T1297:23-27

21.  Drummond T1298:9-11; T1298:19-22

22.  Macnamara T1290:11 – T1291:30

23.  Macnamara T1291:22

24.  Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, pp. 23 & 24

25.  Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 21

26.  Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 21

27.  Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, p. 34, recommendation 6

28.  Drummond T1282:5-16

29.  Macnamara T1282:25-30; T1282:2-6; T1283:29-30

30.  Exhibit 53 – Statement of Merita Tabain, para. 56

31.  Exhibit 53 – Statement of Merita Tabain, para. 18

32.  Exhibit 53 – Statement of Merita Tabain, para. 57; Tabain T1363:9-18

33.  Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.4

34.  Adapted from Exhibit 96 – Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire Operational Communications Structure

35.  Exhibit 53 – Statement of Merita Tabain, para. 88

36.  Exhibit 1 – Statement of Craig Lapsley, para. 164

37.  Exhibit 1 – Statement of Craig Lapsley, para. 168

38.  Tabain T1390:27 – T391:7

39.  Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.6

40.  Lapsley T99:25-28

41.  Macnamara T1359:15-23

42.  Lapsley T100:13-21

43.  Lapsley T99:20 – T100:8

44.  Exhibit 46 – Statement of Rosemary Lester, attachment 18

45.  Exhibit 1 – Statement of Craig Lapsley, paras 146-169

46.  Exhibit 1 – Statement of Craig Lapsley, para. 161

47.  Exhibit 36 – Statement of Nicholas Pole, attachment 42

48.  Lapsley T62:21-23

49.  Exhibit 53 – Statement of Merita Tabain, paras 110 & 111

50.  Tabain T1400:15-21

51.  Exhibit 1 – Statement of Craig Lapsley, para. 166

52.  Lapsley T96:2-8

53.  Tabain T1398:12 – T1340:4

54.  Exhibit 56 – Statement of Alan Hall, para. 182; Exhibit 55 – Statement of John Mitchell, para. 44

55.  Tabain T1396:1-27

56.  Written submission of Ron Ipsen

57.  Community consultation, Kernot Hall, Morwell, 10 April 2014, 12.30 pm

58.  Drummond T1277:24-31

59. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.6.2
60. Adapted from Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, exhibit 3 (adapted to correct errors in dates)
61. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.3.11
62. Exhibit 46 – Statement of Rosemary Lester, attachment 19
63. Exhibit 32 – Statement of John Merritt, appendix 4, High Level Smoke Advisory - Latrobe Valley 0900 Friday 28 February 2014 (EPA.0001.001.0035)
64. Lund T771:7-20
65. Drummond T1284:15-19
66. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.3.10
67. Community consultation, Kernot Hall, Morwell, 10 April 2014, 6 pm; Community consultation, Federation University Auditorium, Churchill, 11 April 2014, 1.30 pm
68. Exhibit 53 – Statement of Merita Tabain, paras 89 & 90
69. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.2.6; Written submission of Susan Dietrich
70. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, pp. 30 & 31; Exhibit 30 – Statement of Tracie Lund, para. 20
71. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, pp. 30 & 31
72. Written submission of Pat Bartholomuez
73. Exhibit 43 – Statement of Vicki Hamilton, para. 13
74. Exhibit 43 – Statement of Vicki Hamilton, para. 14
75. Wilson T1947:19-27
76. Exhibit 49 – Statement of Annette Wheatland, para. 26
77. Brook T1099:5-25
78. Exhibit 30 – Statement of Tracie Lund, para. 25
79. Lund T767:22-31; Hall T1497:6-17; Written submission of Kylie Stockdale
80. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.4.2
81. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 35
82. Exhibit 32 – Statement of John Merritt, para. 50
83. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para 6.3.7
84. Tabain T1407:19 – T1408:10
85. Exhibit 32 – Statement of John Merritt, appendix 3; Peer Reviews of the EPA Victoria Response to the Morwell Coal Fire Air Quality Assessment and Monitoring Programs (EPA.0001.007.0010)
86. Exhibit 32 – Statement of John Merritt, appendix 3; Peer Reviews of the EPA Victoria Response to the Morwell Coal Fire Air Quality Assessment and Monitoring Programs (EPA.0001.007.0010)
87. Exhibit 54 – Statement of Brooke Burke, paras 27 & 30
88. Burke T1371:14-20
89. Exhibit 32 – Statement of John Merritt, appendix 3; Peer Reviews of the EPA Victoria Response to the Morwell Coal Fire Air Quality Assessment and Monitoring Programs (EPA.0001.007.0010)
90. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.4.4
91. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 41
92. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 41
93. Written submission of the Latrobe City Council
94. Written submission of the Latrobe City Council
95. Written submission of the Latrobe City Council
96. Exhibit 71 – Statement of Robert Jackman, para. 22
97. Exhibit 54 – Statement of Brooke Burke, para.14
98. Exhibit 55 – Statement of John Mitchell, para. 97
99. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.4.4
100. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.4.5
101. Ellis T892:28; T893:20
102. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, pp. 42-45
103. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 44
104. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 43
105. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 45
106. Harkins T1547:9-27
107. Exhibit 30 – Statement of Tracie Lund, paras 4, 10-11 & 14
108. Lund T:767:9
109. Exhibit 30 – Statement of Tracie Lund, paras 22 & 23
110. Andrew T1522:12-18; Exhibit 57 – Statement of Karen Andrew, para. 8
111. Andrew T1522:19-31; Exhibit 57 – Statement of Karen Andrew, para. 31
112. Exhibit 57 – Statement of Karen Andrew, para. 35
113. Andrew T1528:16-28

114. Written submission of Deafaccess Gippsland

115. Exhibit 35 – Statement of Simon Ellis, paras 36 & 41-52

116. The only community consultations where the ABC was not mentioned in feedback were: Community consultation, Morwell Bowling Club, Morwell, 16 April 2014, 7 am; Multicultural Community consultation, 20 Hazelwood Road, Morwell, 7 May 2014, 4 pm

117. Lapsley T61:8-12

118. Tabain T1393:12-19

119. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.3.1

120. Exhibit 52 – Joint report of James Macnamara and Lachlan Drummond, p. 2

121. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.3.1

122. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 5

123. Exhibit 51 – Expert report of Lachlan Drummond, para. 6.2.2

124. Macnamara T1292:1-17

125. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 5

126. Exhibit 52 – Joint report of James Macnamara and Lachlan Drummond, p. 3

127. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 6

128. Written submission of the Latrobe City Council, p. 8

129. Lester T1200:12-18

130. Hazelwood mine fire media conference 2014, reported across all mediums, Traralgon, 26 February 2014, media conference with Dr Rosemary Lester, Mr Craig Lapsley and Mr John Merritt , viewed 3 August 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gg58UUY_d58

131. Stavropoulos, P 2014, 'Crews battling Hazelwood open cut mine fire use 'balancing' act to avoid the potential of flooding and damage', *ABC News Online*, 19 February 2014 , viewed 3 August 2014, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-02-19/crews-battling-hazelwood-open-cut-mine-fire-facing-challenges/5270470

132. Written submission of the Victorian Government, 22 May 2014 para. 9.92

133. Exhibit 50 – Expert report of James Macnamara, p. 37