

VIC News

Air pollution from Hazelwood mine fire contributed to increase in deaths

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👤 REBEKAH CAVANAGH Herald Sun



The fire at the open-cut Hazelwood mine in the Latrobe Valley blanketed communities in thick, acrid smoke.
Picture: Ian Currie.

RESIDENTS choked by toxic smoke during last year's Hazelwood coal mine fire have demanded an apology, after a report revealed air pollution from the 45-day fire contributed to an increase in deaths in the Latrobe Valley.

The damning fire inquiry report found the mortality rate in the four months after the fire ignited was 17 per cent higher than the same period in previous years. There was just a one in 12 probability this could have been by chance.

The report also criticised how the Health Department and former Coalition government handled the incident.

The fire at the open-cut mine near Morwell, which started on February 9 last year, blanketed Morwell and nearby towns in thick, acrid smoke.

Morwell residents were issued with masks but were told it was safe to stay.

The latest findings are expected to open the door for class action proceedings.

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Locals in Morwell to wearing masks as the Hazelwood Open Cut Coal Mine continued to burn.

Kiery-Anne Clissold is certain that the death of her husband, Craig McCormack, from a brain aneurysm six months after the fire started was caused by the fumes.

"I have no doubt those toxins killed my husband," she said.

Mr McCormack had no history of headaches or any health problems beforehand.

“He was healthy to the point he should have laid beside me for the next 30 years.”

Ms Clissold, 51, who described Morwell as like “living on the edge of a volcano” at the time of the fire, said the report was a step towards justice for her husband and other families who lost loved ones.



The aftermath of Hazelwood open cut mine fire. Photo: Wayne Rigg, CFA

It is the second inquiry into the open-cut mine fire, with the first, held from February to September last year by the former Coalition government, finding the Latrobe community, particularly residents of Morwell, reported suffering distressing adverse health effects from the fire, including sore and stinging eyes, headaches and blood noses.

Morwell mother Julie Brown said her three children’s mild asthma had become more severe since the fire.

“It angers me that the health department blatantly lied to us about the health risks,” she said.

“How can you put costs on health and human life?”

Health Minister Jill Hennessy said the report’s findings were “damning” and said the community was entitled to seek legal advice.

Mine owner GDF Suez highlighted two words in the report — no “absolute proof” to support the findings.

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Comments