

Report into coalmine fire to be tabled tomorrow

MELBOURNE — The Victorian town of Morwell has demanded answers since bushfires spotted into the Hazelwood coalmine in February, igniting a six-week blaze.

After more than six months, Morwell's time has come.

In Parliament tomorrow, the state government is due to table an inquiry's recommendations about the 45-day blaze that cloaked the town in smoke.

Community group Voices of the Valley said its No. 1 priority was for the government to address the health concerns of residents who were exposed to the smoke, which

included carcinogenic particulate matter.

It also wants to ensure the community will be protected from future fires.

Group president Wendy Farmer said mine operator GDF Suez needed to lift its game.

"We're really hoping that this will never happen again, and people are scared that it will," Ms Farmer said.

"They should never have let the fire get into the mine. They should have had the procedures in place to put it out."

The inquiry, headed by former Supreme Court justice Bernard

Teague, was told that the mine operators were not properly prepared and co-ordination with emergency services was poor.

GDF Suez says it is working to improve the safety of the mine and the processes for managing emergencies.

In the final weeks of the inquiry, GDF Suez Hazelwood chief executive George Graham made an undertaking to minimise the risk of a repeat of the fire.

Work has started to install more pipes and hydrants in the mine, remove vegetation from worked-out areas and rehabilitate part of the mine's northern batters.

GDF Suez has also worked with the Country Fire Authority to improve preparedness for mine fires. A GDF Suez spokesman said more would be done when the recommendations were received.

The inquiry was also asked to make recommendations for the government and council to minimise the risk of embers getting into the open-cut mines.

Environment Victoria said the fire was one of the worst environmental disasters in Victorian history and called for the government to develop an emergency response plan for communities living near coalmines.