

Hazelwood coal mine fire: Ash residue in Morwell roof cavities project

Community update No. 2 – August 2016

The Victorian Government is responding to community concerns relating to ash residue in roof cavities in Morwell from the 2014 Hazelwood coal mine fire, and is working closely with the community, Latrobe City Council and the Environment Protection Authority to better understand the concerns of Morwell residents and to investigate and respond to these concerns.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has prepared the following information to provide an update on the Ash residue in Morwell roof cavities project and to answer questions from members of the community that have been received to-date.

About the project

The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry recommended that the government test and analyse any ash that may have settled in the roof cavities of houses in Morwell and provide advice about any potential known or unknown health effects.

The 'Ash residue in Morwell roof cavities' project will address this recommendation and also allow government agencies to better understand the community's concerns about ash in roof cavities.

DHHS is leading the 'Ash residue in Morwell roof cavities' project, working closely with the community, Latrobe City Council and the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) Victoria.

How will the project be done?

An independent expert will test and analyse the ash contained in 50 roof cavities in Morwell and identify and assess any risks to health. Another 10 roof cavities in another area in the Gippsland region unaffected by the mine fire will be tested for comparison.

The independent expert will:

- set out how the testing and analysis will be done
- contract an occupational hygienist to collect and analyse ash samples
- provide expert advice to DHHS and the community
- prepare a high-quality report that:
 - shows the results of the occupational hygienist's sampling and analysis

- assesses any health risks of ash in the roof cavity
- recommends next steps.

If the analysis of the ash in roof cavities finds anything that could be hazardous to health, or of unknown impact on health, an audit will be done on the extent of the community's exposure to ash and an action plan developed to manage any risks.

How can I be involved?

Community members can participate by registering to receive monthly project updates, asking questions and raising concerns by email ashproject@dhhs.vic.gov.au or by phoning **1300 761 874**, and by attending community meetings. More information about these meetings will be provided in future community updates. To register your interest in receiving updates you can:

- complete the online registration form at: <http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/hazelwood/ash-project>
- pick up a registration form from Latrobe City Council or DHHS Morwell office
- download a registration form from <http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/hazelwood/ash-project>

Registrations to volunteer your house for testing close on Monday 15 August. We have received a very good response, and while it may not be possible to offer testing to all who express interest, DHHS will endeavour to keep everyone informed about the results of the project.

Your questions answered

Members of the Latrobe Valley community have contacted us with questions about the project – we're sharing the answers to make sure everyone is informed.

How will the government keep the community up to date?

DHHS will keep people informed throughout the project and regularly check with community members and local groups that they are getting enough information and that it is being provided in the right way. If you have registered for the project you can expect to receive email updates or information in the mail depending on your preference.

A series of open meetings and community group briefings will be held. DHHS and Latrobe City Council will promote these events as they arise.

You can also visit the project page on the DHHS website or follow DHHS on Facebook and Twitter.

Can I volunteer my roof cavity for testing if I live in a rented house?

If you are a tenant, you should contact your landlord or the agent who is managing the property on behalf of the landlord (e.g. real estate agent) in writing (e.g. letter or email) to obtain their consent to participate in the project. Local real estate agents have been informed about the project by DHHS.

As the project works are "non-urgent repairs" under the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997*, consent from your landlord is important to ensure that tenants are not liable for any damage that could be caused by the contractor entering the roof cavity.

Can I volunteer a commercial property for testing?

No. In response to Recommendation 9 of the *Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report 2015/2016 Volume III*, this project seeks to address coal ash residue in Morwell houses only. However, you can still receive updates, ask questions, participate in community meetings and learn about the results.

When will I know if my house has been selected for testing?

The independent expert will contact you in September 2016 if your house has been selected for testing.

Can I still participate in the project if my house is not selected for testing?

Yes, all members of the Morwell and Latrobe Valley communities are invited to participate in the project.

Even if your house is not selected for testing, you can still receive updates, ask questions, participate in community meetings and learn about the results.

Is this project only looking at ash from the coal mine fire?

This project will test and analyse coal ash residue produced during the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire that may have settled in roof cavities in homes in Morwell.

Chemicals, dust and other matter (e.g. coal dust from local mines and power stations) may also be present in properties in Morwell and adjacent townships.

However, in response to Recommendation 9, this project seeks to address coal ash residue produced by the Hazelwood mine fire only.

I've heard about a similar project that is testing ash in the Latrobe Valley, what's the difference?

Researchers at the Menzies Institute for Medical Research at the University of Tasmania are leading a small separate study of ceiling dust. They are looking at how far the smoke from the Hazelwood coal mine fire spread across the Latrobe Valley. In November and December 2015, the researchers collected dust and soil from 39 homes in the Latrobe Valley. Analysis of the ceiling dust samples has commenced and is due to be completed later this year.

For additional information please contact the research team at Latrobe.Dust@utas.edu.au or phone the ELF study helpline on 1800 322 102.

The aim of the Ash residue in Morwell roof cavities project is to assess the potential exposure and risk of brown coal ash residue in roof cavities to the Morwell community as a result of the 2014 Hazelwood coal mine fire.

Who will clean my roof cavity if anything hazardous is found?

Any decisions about cleaning will be made once the testing is completed and the independent expert provides the results and recommendations.

Is it safe to go into my roof cavity?

DHHS advises residents not to go into their roof cavities without expert advice or without following safety precautions.

For more information about hazards in roof cavities go to <http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/environmental-health-in-the-home/hazards-in-roof-cavities> or phone 1300 761 874 during business hours.

More information

Department of Health and Human Services

Community updates and resources will be published on a dedicated project page at:

<http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/hazelwood/ash-project>

Questions about the project can be directed to:

ashproject@dhhs.vic.gov.au or 1300 761 874.

Stay up to date with social media:

- Twitter: @VicGovDHHS #MorwellAshProject
- Facebook: www.facebook.com/VicGovHealth

EPA Victoria

For more information about the EPA's environmental monitoring program in Morwell and surrounding areas call EPA on 1300 372 842 or visit

<http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/hazelwood>

Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry

For more information on the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry visit www.hazelwoodinquiry.vic.gov.au

Project timeline

The following timeline provides relevant dates relating to the project. Future dates are provided as a guide only. We will continue to update the timeline as the project progresses. Keep an eye out for monthly community updates.

Community meetings will be scheduled and promoted throughout the project.

February 2014	Hazelwood coal mine fire burned for at least 45 days until 10 March 2014
March 2014	Hazelwood Mine Fire Board of Inquiry established
May 2015	Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry reopened
February 2016	Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report 2015/2016 Volume III – Health Improvement (Inquiry Report 3) tabled in the Parliament of Victoria. This report includes Recommendation 9, relating to the Ash residue in Morwell roof cavities project
April 2016	The Victorian Premier and Minister for Health announced that the Government had accepted all recommendations from Inquiry Report 3, including the testing and analysis of ash residue in roof cavities, on 15 April 2016
May 2016	The 2016-17 Budget allocated funding to support the implementation of the recommendations in Inquiry Report 3 (including Recommendation 9)
June 2016	Planning underway to implement the project, including the development of a dedicated website and generic email address to facilitate the recruitment of houses for testing, and engagement of an independent expert
July 2016	The procurement process to engage an independent expert closed on 22 July 2016
August 2016	The successful independent expert will be engaged via a DHHS contract. Contracts are published on www.tenders.vic.gov.au
September 2016	The independent expert will develop the selection criteria determining how the testing of houses will be done. Testing is expected to commence during September 2016

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 1300 761 874, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email environmental.healthunit@dhhs.vic.gov.au

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