

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

Community update No. 1 – July 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 about a project that will test ash residue from the Hazelwood coal mine fire in roof cavities in Morwell. Community members can express their interest in receiving project updates and volunteering their house for testing (details are provided on page 2).

What is the project about?

In February 2014 the Hazelwood mine fire burnt for 45 days, becoming the largest and longest fire in the history of the Latrobe Valley.

At the time, the Latrobe Valley was impacted by smoke and ash from the burning brown coal. As a result, the space between the ceiling and the external roof of houses (roof cavities) may contain coal ash from the mine fire.

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.

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.

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.

Who is leading the project?

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.

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.

How do I know the results will be reliable?

DHHS will appoint an independent expert to run the project. This expert will need expertise in scientific analysis and testing, project management, health risk assessment and talking with communities. They 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.

How can I be involved?

Community members can participate by subscribing to receive project updates, asking questions and raising concerns by emailing ashproject@dhhs.vic.gov.au or phoning 1300 761 874, and by attending community meetings. More information about these will be provided in further community updates.

The independent expert will test ash from the roof cavities of 50 houses in Morwell and residents in Morwell can express interest in having their roof cavity tested. It may not be possible to offer testing to all who express interest as the number is limited to 50 and the independent expert will have to ensure that the houses selected are appropriate. For example, they may want to have different roof types and locations.

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>

How do I register my interest?

To register your interest in participating in the project or 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
- download a registration form from <http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/hazelwood/ash-project>

Return instructions are included on the registration form.

Please register your interest using one of the options above by Monday 15 August 2016.

Where can I get 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

For information about hazards in roof cavities call 1300 761 874 during business hours.

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

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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