

Voices of the Valley

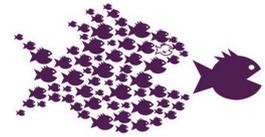
Voicing the concerns of the Latrobe Valley community

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Voices of the Valley

Incorporated Association A0060859B

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Submission to **Inquiry into Health Impacts of Air Pollution in Victoria**

This submission is made on behalf of Voices of the Valley, a community advocacy group based in the Latrobe Valley.

Voices of the Valley (VotV) was formed during the Hazelwood Mine Fire of 2014. Our focus was on health, particularly as affected by prolonged exposure to smoke and air pollution. As participants in the second Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry, we became familiar with the various studies and reports which documented the health impacts on the Latrobe Valley population of decades of the coal-based power industry. Consequently, VotV has paid close attention to industry in the Latrobe Valley, especially to air quality, monitoring of emissions, potential effects of changes to existing industries and potential impacts of proposed new industries. One of the things we have observed over the last six years is that each proposal tends to be presented in comparison to existing industries and activities rather than how it might add to existing industries and their environmental and health costs.

When the Victorian Government initiated community consultations about a Clean Air Policy in 2018, we welcomed this as a signal that a right to clean air would become a priority. However, this seems not to have happened. We hoped that Victoria would set, as a principle, the right to clean air, rather than, as currently appears to be the case, cleaner air as long as it does not cost too much.

While we talk about the environment and climate change, we seem to forget the health issues that are attributed to pollution, while discussions about air pollution rarely include reference to greenhouse gases. We must start explicitly linking these two issues to ensure that proposals to implement a circular economy need to be carefully scrutinised and closely monitored to make sure we do not create the next environmental issues. A case in point is in Latrobe City (the local government area of the Latrobe Valley) where a planning permit was fast tracked for a Secondary Lead Smelter in close proximity to a local primary school. Objections to the permit on health grounds were recognised as important by the local council which refused a planning permit. This was over-ruled by the Minister for Planning who approved the application because it promised a small number of jobs. His Planning staff told members of the local community that health could not be considered relevant to the decision as health does not come into planning. WHO states clearly there is no safe level of lead, but Victoria has extremely weak standards on pollution and heavy metals.

Regarding the impact of economic and population growth on air pollution and health outcomes, historically, the wealthy and the middle classes have been able to choose where to live while workers and working-class families have had to live close to industry. This is evident in Melbourne's division between 'leafy green' suburbs and older inner city and western suburbs clustered around industrial

sites. Apart from the obvious differences in amenity, workers have always lived in more crowded conditions, with greater air pollution, and consequently with greater risks to health. This could be mitigated, to some extent, by more public open space for recreation and including trees for shade and cooling, especially in densely populated areas. However, population growth and urban spread carry a risk of reducing open space, as clearly evident along the rail and freeway corridors between the metropolitan area and the Latrobe Valley, and similarly to the west of Melbourne. This short-sighted practice could be better managed by requiring more attention to health and future land use in planning and zoning. Currently, housing developments in extended urban areas have led to more vehicles on the roads and the loss of vegetation. Closer houses have resulted in a greater need for air conditioning because there is not space to grow plants for shade.

This highlights a problem of Environmental Justice - the rich can choose their locations to avoid air pollution while the poor cannot. Dirty industries are still located in poorer areas, including the Latrobe Valley. Further, there is evidence of perpetuating industrial pollution and associated health costs by siting new polluting industries where there were previous polluting industries because established zoning laws permits this, as we are currently seeing in the Latrobe Valley with the approval of a secondary lead centre in what is geographically the centre of Latrobe City.

It is unfortunately apparent that decisions made within one portfolio take no account of interests covered in another. We are surrounded by examples of this and breathe contaminated air.

These are just some instances:

- Planned burns undertaken by Vic Forests which do not take into account the health risks associated with particulate matter pm2.5 and pm10 which is regulated in other industries.
- Smoke haze for most of autumn from the burning of timber industry waste, apparently not subject to regulation by the EPA.
- Planning based on industrial zoning determined in the past which not only does not take health into account but precludes taking health into account (Secondary Lead Smelter in Latrobe City).
- 'Cost effectiveness' defined as the cost to implement improved technology while not considering possible health impacts or treating them as inevitable, as evidenced in the recently revised coal-fired power station licences.
- An idling engine can produce up to twice the emissions of a car in motion, churning out sulphur dioxide, particulate matter and nitrogen oxide. These chemicals also have a negative effect on the environment by contributing to poor air quality & health. All of these contribute to asthma, heart disease and even lung cancer, according to [Transport for London](#). **In London & other countries, drivers who do not cut their engines when waiting are not just wasting fuel: they are breaking the law and risk being fined.** <https://www.confused.com/on-the-road/driving-law/fines-for-idling>. [While some countries are encouraging a transition to electric vehicles to reduce pollution from fossil-fuel powered vehicles, Victoria proposes to levy 'road tax' on such vehicles which are already more expensive to buy than petrol vehicles.](#)

While there are many sources of emissions that are well known to have a negative impact on the environment, such as wood heaters, stockpile burns, planned burns, car pollution, power stations and other industries, it too often seems that even though the risk is known EPA and the State government ignore the risks to the environment and health, or that 'cost effectiveness' is an acceptable reason not to tighten regulations or to act decisively.

Our suggestions are:

- that any new proposal or significant change in an existing operation should be explicitly assessed for whether it adds to or ameliorates existing air pollution in the local environment. Health costs should be included when calculating costs of air pollution and use health savings as off-sets to costs of strategies to reduce air pollution. For instance, reduction of childhood asthma could be set against the costs of tighter regulation of emissions. Mental well-being is also a health issue and should be included in any consideration of health effect.
- Make it mandatory that any proposal include consideration of emissions and pollution. For example, a tax on electric vehicles to raise money for roads should be considered in relation to its discouragement of electric vehicles and encouragement of petrol and diesel powered vehicles leading to more emissions. A corollary is requiring continuous improvement in regulating, monitoring, reporting and controlling air pollution.

While EPA Victoria has had a reform and new requirements under the EP Act will be brought in on 1st July 2021, EPA still have some of the world's weakest air quality and emissions standards. To get serious on health and the environment we need to be able to measure what is happening and then regulate the Impact the Environment has on health. "If we don't measure, we can't regulate it".

The principle of Environmental Justice should be used as part of the assessment of all new projects, such that if a project would not be acceptable in a 'rich' area, it should it not be approved in a 'poor' area.