

Warburton Environment

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Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into Health Impacts of Air Pollution in
Victoria

Date of submission

23 April 2021

Dear Environment and Planning Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Health Impacts of Air Pollution in Victoria

Who is Warburton Environment?

Warburton Environment was incorporated in 2008 as a not-for-profit non-government community organisation dedicated to protecting the environment of the Central Highlands of Victoria.

Statement of Purpose

Facilitate links and networking, exchange and interaction within the community to support protection and restoration of ecosystems in the Central Highlands.

Provide a space and opportunity for refining and promoting the vision of, and transition to sustainable development – through all forms of learning and public awareness.

Develop strategies at every level in the community to strengthen capacity and action towards protection and restoration of ecosystems in the Central Highlands.

This submission will be focussing on the impact of pollutants generated by “planned burns” which comprise both post logging burns conducted by Forest Fire Management Victoria and

DELWP staff as part of timber harvesting operations as well as fuel reduction burns in State forests.

As we are all aware, and as the Committee may know- Autumn is burning off season. Every year at this time, DELWP and Forest Fire Management commence burn-offs in the Upper Yarra and Toolangi areas and indeed across the rest of the State forests of Victoria wherever native timber harvesting occurs. Many have already been conducted this season and there are many more scheduled in the coming weeks in an attempt to address the extreme fuel load in the State Forests surrounding our communities. In addition, the many logging coupes in close proximity to our towns that have already been logged undergoing “hazard reduction” burns of the remnant slash conducted and there are many more scheduled for logging in the next few months (ref: VicForests December 2019 Approved TRP interactive maps)

<http://vicforeststrp.maps.arcgis.com/apps/PublicInformation/index.html?appid=f25d9bb792e049bebc77ccc5daaf7d03>

When burnt, those coupes already logged add to the smoke and particulate matter that creates health hazards for our community members-many of whom have chronic respiratory issues. It is well documented also that the Yarra Ranges has a death rate twice that in Melbourne from respiratory conditions as well as very high rates of asthma. (p141 https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/.../health_and_wellbeing_p...)

The health impacts catalogued by the Shire of Yarra Ranges as well as anecdotal evidence of the yearly spikes in presentations to General Practices and Emergency Departments with exacerbations of respiratory conditions such as asthma, Chronic obstructive airways disease as well as angina and heart attacks all prompted the Shire of Yarra Ranges Council to write to the EPA and Minister D'Ambrosio in 2020 (see attached letter) at the behest of local General Practitioners who were very concerned at the health impacts these burn-offs would have in the midst of Covid lockdown and the already stressed health system.

In response, the EPA did install temporary air quality monitors as requested by the GPs both in Warburton and Healesville. We are thankful to have EPA units in these towns however even so, there are still marked significant impacts for hours overnight when the smoke settles and air quality can reach EPA levels considered very poor. There is no Hospital Emergency Department within an hour's drive or more for many in our community plus we experience longer than average ambulance response times. There is also no regular after-hours medical services.

The EPA health advice regarding smoke is to stay indoors or go to the local shopping centre or municipal building such as the local library all of which is redundant advice if the poor air quality is in the early hours of a frosty Autumn morning when the cold air traps the smoke in

the valleys and gullies that are so common in the Yarra Valley and surrounds¹⁴²⁻¹⁴⁵ https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/.../health_and_wellbeing_p...

Our communities are already disadvantaged by lack of access to nearby hospital support and the rates of respiratory complications both in the elderly as well as children with asthma and other chronic illness are known to be exacerbated by these burn-offs. Despite the temporary monitors being on the EPA AirWatch website, there are many elderly who are not internet savvy and indeed in parts of the Shire there are communication Black Spots with no phone or internet reception meaning warnings issued by the EPA are not accessible. Some of our members have invested in their own air quality monitors and can verify that even when the EPA monitor in Warburton is registering "good" air quality, people living closer to these planned burn are being forced to breathe in dangerous levels of PM2.5 which is well documented by numerous peer reviewed papers to be very hazardous to health on many levels both in acute high level exposure as well as chronic lower level exposure.

We also question if there is co-ordination between Vicforests and DELWP so they are not burning concurrently in the same area thus greatly increasing the levels of particulate matter and smoke for the people who live in the nearby towns.

The new Environmental Protection Laws which the EPA are widely advertising as being a shared responsibility for all Victorians includes the GED (General Environmental Duty). This is applicable to everyone in the State as clarified via FaceBook Messenger with the EPA.

Warburton Environment members along with all Victorians will be held to account if we cause air pollution that impacts on our neighbours and community. We are curious to know if these Government agencies responsible for conducting the "planned burns" including industrial logging coupe burns on behalf of VicForests will also be held to account through the GED and be appropriately penalised and fined when they cause significant health issues to the communities directly impacted.

Our communities are situated in rural and urban fringe areas surrounded by forests and Melbourne's water catchment areas- every year we choke and get sick for the FFMV and DELWP burnoffs, often mostly burning remnant "slash: after native timber logging is conducted. Despite the best efforts to ignite on days that are calm, the pollutants invariable affect us year after year and we want to know if they will be held accountable for the documented health impacts on us and the increased burden on an already overstretched health system that is still struggling with bed block, longer waiting times in ED due to staff shortages and increased presentations because of smoke inhalation

Yours sincerely,

Warburton Environment Executive

Nicole Fox President

Karina Doughty Vice President

Dr Jennifer Conway Secretary

Alice Hardinge Treasurer

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The Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP
Minister for Energy, Environment & Climate Change
By email:
lily.dambrosio@parliament.vic.gov.au

25 March 2020

Dear Minister

Yarra Ranges Council is a frontline partner with you in responding to the community impacts of COVID19. Council received an important request from local General Practitioners (GPs) in relation to the health impact of planned burns in our area. The GPs noted with concern that impacts on vulnerable community members with existing respiratory conditions are now further exacerbated by COVID19. There is an urgent need to mitigate the potential additional health impacts of smoke from planned burns for residents of the Healesville and Warburton areas.

To bring the reality of this risk into greater focus, the following data for Yarra Ranges shows a level of risk that is very concerning to Council.

In 2017/18, Yarra Ranges was 29% above the average rate for vaccine-preventable pneumonia and influenza hospital admissions. This is the second-highest rate in metropolitan Melbourne. Residents' rate of death from pneumonia and influenza was also 28% above average.

Council at its meeting of 24 March 2020 considered this as a matter of urgency. My letter requests your help through direction to relevant departments to protect the health of our residents. Council endorsed the following recommendations:

“Write to the EPA as a matter of urgency to request the installation of air quality monitors in Warburton and Healesville immediately.

Write to the relevant Ministers, State Government departments and agencies involved in planned burns; DELWP, Vic Forests and Forest Fire Management Victoria to request the following urgent action:

Increase communications about planned burns to the communities of Healesville and Warburton through increasing visibility of website resources, promotion to affected communities including using Council networks, early notification of planned burns through electronic signage and alerts to Council.

Request the State government establish Healesville Hospital as a COVID19 test centre to enable residents living in the Healesville and Warburton areas to have reasonable access to testing, and that the disused Warburton Private Hospital be considered for reactivation”.

Council believes the proposal to install air quality monitors in Healesville and Warburton is straightforward and request this is implemented quickly by the Environment Protection Authority.

Council will also use its own communication channels to increase community access to information and awareness of planned burns including links on Council's website and utilising its social media platforms.

Further, Council understands that Healesville Hospital was identified as a potential testing facility for this under-serviced area of Victoria but a decision was taken locate it at Ringwood instead. In the ever expanding COVID19 pandemic we urge the government to initiate a centre in Healesville in addition to Ringwood.

The recommendation also notes the potential to quickly activate the old Warburton Hospital in the response to COVID19.

Please see attached an extract from the correspondence from local GPs articulating the urgency and rationale for this matter to be actioned immediately. You will see it is informed, identifies the specific impact on local residents and suggests greater coordination and communication by government departments to better support communities and prevent further health burden.

Council also understands and supports the reduction of bushfire hazard and risk and trusts this proposal will help to strike a balance between the priority need to protect health at this time.

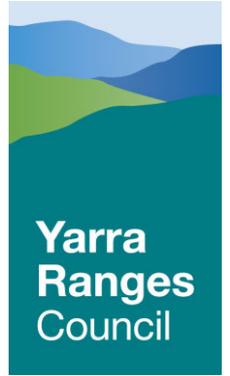
To discuss this matter further please contact Council's Acting Manager Community Wellbeing, Isha Scott 

Yours sincerely



Cr Richard Higgins
Mayor

Cc: The Hon Jenny Mikakos Min Health
Cc: Dr Cathi Wilkinson, CEO EPA Vic
Cc: John Bradley, Secretary of DELWP
Cc: Monique Dawson, CEO Vic Forests
Cc: Chris Hardman, Forest Fire Management Vic



Attachment 1

Letter to Council and EPA from Healesville,
Pat's Creek GPs

March 2020

“DELWP and Forest Fire Management have already commenced burn-offs in the Upper Yarra and Toolangi with many more scheduled in the coming weeks in an attempt to address the extreme fuel load in the State Forests surrounding our communities. In addition, the many logging coupes in close proximity to our towns that have already been logged are to have “hazard reduction” burns of the remnant slash conducted and there are many more scheduled for logging in the next few months (ref: VicForests December 2019 Approved TRP interactive maps)

<http://vicforeststrp.maps.arcgis.com/apps/PublicInformation/index.html?appid=f25d9bb792e049bebc77ccc5daaf7d03>

When burnt, those coupes already logged will add to the smoke and particulate matter that creates health hazards for our patients-many of whom have chronic respiratory issues. It is well documented also that the Yarra Ranges has a death rate twice that in Melbourne from respiratory conditions as well as very high rates of asthma.

(p141 https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/.../health_and_wellbeing_p...)

Given the current State of Emergency surrounding Covid19, coupled with lack of a Hospital Emergency Department within an hour's drive or more for our patients, longer than average ambulance response times or any regular after- hours medical services, we request that the EPA install Air Quality monitors so our residents can be better informed of the conditions we are being forced to endure at the hands of the Government agencies.

p142-145 https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/.../health_and_wellbeing_p...

The nearest monitoring station is in Mooroolbark, over 40 km away from Warburton and 28km from Healesville. The EPA advises that any distance greater than 15 km reduces the accuracy/relevance of the AirWatch rating so this station is useless for our communities. The advice on the EPA website regarding using line of sight visibility to assess air quality is irrelevant also to our communities as we live in a valley, surrounded by large mountains and many do not have even a 1 km line of sight.

We trust that given this reduced air quality is being caused by government agencies, the EPA being the authority responsible will install monitors to allow our communities to be better prepared for the added health stress being foisted upon them.

Our patients are already disadvantaged by lack of access to nearby hospital support and the rates of respiratory complications both in the elderly as well as children with asthma and other chronic illness will be exacerbated by these burn-offs. If there is no way for the air to be properly monitored, how can the authorities determine whether the air quality is already poor/very poor before igniting further burns?

We also question if there is co-ordination between Vicforests and DELWP so they are not burning concurrently in the same area thus greatly increasing the levels of particulate matter and smoke for the people who live in the nearby towns.

Like the rest of the populace, there is growing fear and anxiety in the Yarra Valley regarding what the Covid19 pandemic will mean to our communities. With the impact this virus may have on those with underlying health issues, we are now facing months of smoke haze when already there are shortages of medications including asthma inhalers. The potential impact on our patients is huge and will put even greater pressure on the already struggling emergency departments servicing these areas i.e. Maroondah, Box Hill and Angliss hospitals.