

## **Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Health Impacts of Air Pollution**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to the Inquiry.

### **Background and contextual information**

I have lived in the Dandenong Ranges for over 35 years. I became concerned about woodsmoke/biomass air pollution about 7 years ago when I decided to replace my wood heater, my only heating at the time. I have enough dead wood on my ½ hectare to provide wood for heating for the rest of my life, and I understood wood burning was an environmentally sound practice. I was also regularly burning off to reduce fuel following CFA advice, as I live in a high bushfire risk area.

Whilst I was aware that wood smoke could cause problems for people with lung disease, particularly asthma, I was shocked to slowly discover diverse concerning health information when I searched for a wood stove online. The extensive, established research evidence on the broad cumulative harms to health of wood and other biomass smoke was more accessible to me at that time as I was studying at university and able to access research papers. Most of this research is now freely available online.

I was and still am stunned at the lack of information provided by my local councils on the harms of wood smoke which they are meant to be regulating. For over 5 years I have been lobbying and requesting my council (Cardinia) to provide information to our community on how harmful wood smoke is to health, and its diverse impacts. They have failed to do so. My submissions on smoke to consultations have disappeared from reports on three occasions. A 20 minute discussion at a community meeting got no reference in the summary of community concerns published. A community fire prevention consultation group was never given information on smoke harms, and unsurprisingly lobbied for more burning-off hours.

I have spoken with and emailed councillors, council's newsletter editor, the Senior Environmental Health Officer (who requested to be reminded what PM2.5 was a year after I sent him information). Also the local laws officers, who have come out to address repeated breaches of the burning off local law by multiple neighbours, but would not provide information in the council newsletter or by mail to residents. Having worked for local government for many years I am even more incredulous at this lack of duty of care.

Cardinia Council extended burning off to 24 hours, although I was told they kept an extra day free of burning off due to my lobbying. 24 hour burning off is not supported by air scientist Paul Torre at EPA Victoria due to the cold air inversion effect which traps the pollution close to where we live and breathe for long periods, especially overnight. However at the time EPA Victoria would not advise councils on their local laws.

I confirmed this when the adjacent council Yarra Ranges, whose border I live close to, reviewed their burning off local law. They ignored my submission, and some heartrending submissions from others on the health impacts of smoke they were experiencing. Asthma was the only health issue referred to

by Council, and they didn't consult with any health representative or their own Environmental Health Officers. Nor did they consult with EPA Victoria, although it was claimed by a councillor before they voted that EPA Victoria approved the changes proposed. I obtained a letter from EPA Victoria stating this was not the case and they had not provided any advice.

It is tragic that both councils have extended burning off to 24 hours, leaving residents more vulnerable to smoke and fire risk, as fires are left unattended once dark falls and a local CFA brigade told me this change had increased their call-outs at this time. It is ironic that counter to protecting the community, this change is putting us at greater risk. Having obtained expert advice that I was not making anything safer by burning off, I have ceased this altogether. It is possible my lungs, which have been diagnosed with mild small airway impairment, may already have suffered. My respiratory specialist was reassuring about wood stove use, but looking at the recent research only makes me more convinced he is not well informed.

As a result of this abrogation of duty of care by local government, I attended the Victorian Clean Air Summit, the subsequent poorly attended Yarra Ranges consultation and two days of the Clean Air Society of Australia and New Zealand (CASANZ) Biomass in the Human Environment conference. I am currently attending a community smoke pilot project in Yarra Ranges organized by EPA Victoria, in response to community concern. As there is so little advocacy on biomass smoke pollution, I have felt compelled to become a healthy air advocate, with a focus on biomass smoke. I have written an article for two local community magazines and with a colleague I am developing a webinar which we trialed at the Sustainable Living Festival this year (a pdf is attached for your information). As all the responsible authorities have failed to reach out and inform our communities, we feel we must step into the breach.

I have joined other advocates in sharing information, requesting meetings with Minister D'Ambrosio and other MPs, EPA Victoria, and I presented to Glen Eira Council on behalf of others unable to attend the council hearings on their proposed removal of restrictions on open air burning. With no data or evidence, the officer proposal to improve social interaction by supporting backyard fires omitted the social and significant immediate health and wellbeing impacts on neighbours. 7 detailed submissions and two expert witnesses addressed the council, and led to the proposed changes being dismissed. However it should not be left to the community to lead on health and wellbeing, when this was clearly Council's role and duty.

As a retired early childhood development consultant, I am surprised and shocked that early childhood centres are using fire as a centre "risk" experience without any awareness that they are exposing young children and pregnant mothers to smoke that is more harmful than cigarette smoke. How can this be? Most of my career was focused on children with additional needs, and I find it untenable that smoke which is due to recreational and lifestyle or cultural tidying activities, not essential fire prevention, could be impacting on children's development and health in the short and long term.

EPA Victoria monitoring is not capturing what our community is being exposed to, and research is showing damage and emergencies at lower and lower levels. There has been consensus for some years that there is no known level of particulate matter PM2.5 where harm is not occurring. The EPA

Air Watch guidelines bear no relationship to the current research. Nor does my experience of local government officers, who have no air monitors or medical background or basic understanding of the health issues, but pronounce that residents are “sensitive” and they can’t do anything more about the smoke they are suffering.

Nearly all local open air burning off includes wet and green matter, and much that would rot down to nourish soil and plants by next summer. There is attendance in response to complaints but it is easier to beg forgiveness when focused on tidying up. Enforcement is negligible. The reality is that local government is not informed, resourced or motivated to attend to their duty of care around biomass smoke. The antiquated laws that say nothing toxic can be burnt, implying wood burning is safe, need to be thrown out.

### **Key information on air pollution**

As I know others have provided this, I will not submit a list of current references and the ever growing list of diseases associated with PM2.5 particulate pollution and wood smoke in particular.

I do strongly encourage committee members to watch two short videos from UNICEF and WHO which total less than 4 minutes but deeply inform on PM2.5 and its impacts on children and adults.

**UNICEF** [What does Air Pollution PM 2.5 do inside children's body and brain? \(English\)](#)

**WHO** [WHO: Breathe Life - How air pollution impacts your body](#)

I also recommend strongly the recording of a recent presentation on air pollution by Dr Brian Moench of Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment. He has long researched and lobbied for healthy air, and expresses profoundly the key issues with air pollution, including biomass smoke. He emphasises that impacts are greatest at the lower end of exposure, explaining one cigarette a day is almost as harmful as half a pack. This is not the message the community has received during the bushfires, or from Council, DHHS or EPA Victoria.

**Dr. Brian Moench: Air Quality and Climate Change** (health impacts focus) webinar recording (54 minutes) <https://youtu.be/JWIM5QZPHMs>

Melbourne GP and Ass. Prof. Dr Vicki Kotsirilos’ recent webinar for Doctors for the Environment is also informative.

**Dr Vicki Kotsirilos: The Impact of Air Pollution on Human Health** webinar recording (about 60min) November 2020

[https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/XQsbzUh7vw0Yz6a0NTf9R8ZMzwLUgTfgybkjf\\_4R2pyH0ayCMLwoCwHJDaD\\_bfht.Gu5tn8CEi-pKO31q](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/XQsbzUh7vw0Yz6a0NTf9R8ZMzwLUgTfgybkjf_4R2pyH0ayCMLwoCwHJDaD_bfht.Gu5tn8CEi-pKO31q) Passcode: Fph+92@%

**Clean Air Communities Local Clean Air Matters** webinar slides are attached.

Websites with an excellent overview of woodsmoke health and environmental impacts with further videos and referenced information:

**Doctors and Scientists Against Wood Smoke Air Pollution** <https://woodsmokepollution.org/>

A searchable site of reference material on woodsmoke, including climate impacts:

**Australian Air Quality Group** <http://woodsmoke.3sc.net/home>

**Australian Air Quality Group** air pollution website <http://aaqg.3sc.net/home>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS / REQUESTS**

I ask that the Committee to support the following actions:

1. DELWP and EPA Victoria must finalise a draft Victorian Clean Air Strategy informed by the Inquiry, and return it for community consultation. Much has changed since we submitted on the strategy in 2018 (massive bushfires, pandemic and increasing evidence of air pollutions' harms, including with regard to COVID-19).
2. The development of an environmental health information campaign which is highly informed by psychologists and health experts, as well as air scientists, about the risks to health and environment posed by wood and open air biomass burning smoke. This must include a focus on alternatives to burning and not the misleading "burn better" message.
3. Victoria must develop a comprehensive air pollution inventory and research pertinent to current knowledge needed.
4. EPA Victoria must urgently improve its air pollution monitoring, focus on lived experience of air pollution and use of more relevant siting of monitors, including collaboration with citizen science networks. Monitoring in early childhood centres and schools should also be prioritized to prevent harm.
5. A Healthy Home for All type program should provide independent advice to all citizens to support moving away from all burning of fuels, particularly wood, and give support when needed to undertake draft sealing, insulation, removal of wood stoves and fireplaces and switching to efficient sustainable electric heat pumps and solar systems.
6. Wood burning industry employees should be supported to make a transition to sustainable employment as the industry is closed down.
7. DELWP must design a wood burning phase-out program in collaboration with building regulation, local councils and EPA Victoria. This should include no new wood stove and fireplace installations, removal on sale of house, and a timed removal of all stoves and closing of fireplaces. In the phase out period, flue cleaning and wood checks should be introduced, along with a health tax that increases yearly to be commensurate with the current community health costs of the stove smoke.
8. Introduce legislation for anti-idling laws that enforce this strictly in response to the enormous rise in roadside idling, encouraged by smartphone use.

9. Ban further construction of early childhood centres and schools where traffic air pollution will be significant. Develop an assessment program for school drop-off and pick-up to minimise air pollution impacts on children at school, and close streets in front of schools if necessary.

10. Support substantial development of separated cycling and walking space and support a shift to active local lifestyles to reduce use of cars by encouraging alternatives, including better town planning design.

11. Stop logging coup industrial burns, and significantly reduce fuel reduction burn smoke by much better application of expertise to reduce unnecessary and inappropriate burns.

12. Consider bushfire and its smoke as part of future planning for design of houses, town planning, and design of communities, including safe (e.g. earth sheltered) community buildings that can be used as fire and smoke refuges.

13. Review use of air purifiers to protect community health, and support research for more sustainable disposal of filters.

I would be happy to answer questions or speak directly to the committee about air pollution in the community context, including making the transition to a science and health based approach that supports everyone.

I have had some very uncomfortable feelings about giving up my wood stove and all open air burning, as well as acknowledging the damage I might have done to my own and others' health. I recognise these are challenging issues for others too, especially when burning is such a culturally entrenched practice. We should take the lead from our pandemic experience, and foster care for each other based on facts not outdated myths.

Yours sincerely,

Kate Forster

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