

Community Over Mining



Submission for Discussion paper –
Working towards a National Clean Air Agreement

Submitted via email
17 April 2015

The discussion paper on a National Clean Air Agreement rightly confirms the need for responsive measures in acknowledgment of the different types of contaminate air pollution our communities are exposed to and to the consequential impacts on associated costs to the Australian health bill and environment. However, I find certain sections of the discussion paper at odds with how the aims to improve air quality can be achieved.

As a community advocate in Latrobe Valley working for mining regulation reform I have had much interaction with industry, EPA and all levels of Government and I fail to see how this discussion paper, with its lack of detail, can achieve any positive outcomes over and above what has already occurred.

On reading the discussion paper it appears that the system will still be heavily dependent on self-regulation by industry, the same inadequate planning protocols and standards for buffer zones and monitoring, consideration at any one time of changing policy as well as the ever decreasing regulatory burden that industry and government aspire to but, in reality, always affords social and environmental agendas to a lower ranking.

How will those communities most impacted now be better placed into the future if it is the systemic failure of the above issues that is currently failing our communities yet is seemingly re-affirmed as being effective given the lack of acknowledgment in the discussion paper?

Adapting, monitoring and reviewing processes is not being proactive to reducing any communities exposure to air pollutants rather is can only be an indicator that we are already exposed and that we should lock ourselves up for the day until some government agencies says it's safe to come out and breathe less polluting air.

I shall focus my issues of concern on Gippsland in Victoria with attention to Latrobe Valley open cut coal mines.

Was it deliberate of this discussion paper to overlook coal mining and its associated significant air pollution to nearby communities by not providing any specific measures to address particle pollution (PM)? I hold coal pollution as a significant priority to be urgently addressed.

This is why I have concerns that a National Clean Air Agreement cannot be effective to address those polluting sources from coal if the discussion paper disregards the source of pollution rather how can the agreement adapt to the pollution. More of the same policy means more of the same pollution but increasing rather than reducing.

Furthermore, if there is Government change with policy adjustment the agreement would not hold priority for reducing air pollution by being outside of Government influence.

So, how can the community know that an overarching framework will ensure governments of all levels and their agencies can genuinely address and combat air pollution if the implementation of government policy takes precedent and the associated impacts are accommodated to minimise instead to be continuously reducing air pollution and exposure to the person.

'The Agreement is designed to incorporate a range of existing, new and complementary measures to improve Australia's air quality.'

Existing actions are not working, new actions lack detail and complementary measures need more clarification.

- ***strengthened reporting standards for particulate matter under the Ambient Air Quality National Environment Protection Measure (NEPM).***

Reporting standards for particulate matter is still dependent on actual readings and locations of the monitors. It is now known that monitor placement in the Latrobe Valley coal mines are located in the average position for the average person for the average reading so that minority community closest to the mines and most impacted are afforded less protection and given a lower priority ranking. Monitoring is resourced for low risk management for the majority of people whilst ignoring high risk management to the minority.

'Performance monitoring station(s) must be located in a manner such that they contribute to obtaining a representative measure of the air quality likely to be experienced by the general population in the region or sub-region'
National Environment Protection (Ambient Air Quality) Measure 2014

Therefore, no true readings can accurately determine the extent of real exposure and to the health impacts so who will protect these people under this standard if monitoring protocols is not reformed. Monitoring standards and protocols should be informed and prioritised by pollution sources and the relative health impacts.

Planning consideration also needs to be reviewed and reformed to ensure buffer zones will be better managed in the future and those communities living in existing situations seek remediation to improve their health outcomes. I welcome a national standard on PMs but

implementation of any standards are problematic due to conflicting and varied planning schemes and exemptions across state borders.

Any review, reform and scoping to improve air quality with continuous reduction in air pollution should also coincide with improved and reformed frameworks for state planning schemes, alignment of state policies to ensure consistency for compliance and enforcement by State Regulators and improved resources for monitoring to protect community health. If this does not occur the goals and aims of the discussion paper cannot occur.

Similarly, new industry location projected to emit emissions and air pollution need to focus on cumulative impacts of existing regional pollution sources rather than assessing projects in isolation. Also, a further consideration is licence conditions are based on modelling of potential air pollution where modelling can predict the emissions but it cannot control the weather which disperses the pollutants. Avoiding potential for air pollution near communities should take priority.

Possible new emissions control measures need to be expanded and, again, consider buffer zones, siting of industry, non-alignment of planning schemes. I welcome the inclusion of mercury releases but further clarification is needed for those areas already impacted with little attempt to assess the impact to the person, particularly pregnant women, when ingesting fish with high mercury levels. I bring your attention to the Gippsland Lakes in Victoria.

Preliminary Risk Assessment for the Gippsland Lakes with pollution (toxicants) from mining effluents and the high risk and consequence of impact.

Historical research indicates sediment concentrations of mercury > 100 times ANZECC ISQG guidelines (Glover et al. 1980) and a 58% increase in the concentration of mercury in fish from the Lake from 1979 to 1997 (Fabris et al. 1999). Fabris re-assessed mercury in Lake Wellington in (2004 / 2012? Waiting for copy of the report) and concluded that a wide scale assessment of risks was required. Historical gold mining and current coal mining / power generation were identified as likely causes (Glover et al. 1980). However, potential in these freshwater systems is no known.

There is evidence of elevated levels of mercury in dolphins in the Gippsland Lakes and there is the potential for a role for mercury contamination in the mortality of these animals (Monk et al. 2014).

The interesting thing about the following statement is that our government and agencies have been saying to Gippslanders that there is no acid rain as part of air pollution from Latrobe Valley Coal Mines. The community know differently. How does the discussion paper propose to educate the experts?

Research has identified that secondary PM_{2.5}¹ makes an important contribution to sulfur and nitrogen deposition, leading to the acidification and eutrophication of natural ecosystems².

Though seemingly subtle and isolated, such impacts on ecosystems may, in turn, have consequences for human health due to our reliance on their many services, including food.

Under **complementary measures** to help improve Australia's air quality.

The Commonwealth Government is providing \$2.55 billion under the Emissions Reduction Fund to meet Australia's greenhouse gas emissions reduction target. Actions to reduce carbon dioxide emissions will also help to reduce other airborne pollutants including sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, mercury and ozone.

This statement needs to be clarified. How specifically will greenhouse gas emissions be reduced because if this is part of a carbon capture storage (CCS) the government would be replacing one environmental concern with another. Millions of dollars have already been spent to investigate how to inject carbon dioxide into depleted oil and gas fields offshore in Bass Strait Victoria in a seismically active area under an expanded onshore mining program with significant documented subsidence from decades of pass offshore oil and gas extraction and dewatering of Latrobe Valley open cut coal mines.

This discussion paper is very short on detail.

In addition, with my ongoing support of Environmental Justice and as an attendee at the recent National Pollution Summit in Melbourne I endorse the submission prepared by Environmental Justice Australia and Nature Conservation Council of NSW in response to this National Clean Air Agreement Discussion Paper, 16 April 2015.

Tracey Anton

162 Hendersons Road

Toongabbie, Victoria

¹ PM_{2.5} refers to particles with an aerodynamic diameter of 2.5 micrometres or less. Some particles are emitted directly; others are formed in the atmosphere when other pollutants react (secondary PM_{2.5}).

² Air Quality Expert Group (2012) Fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) in the United Kingdom. Available at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69635/pb13837-aqeg-fine-particle-matter-20121220.pdf