

Submission to the Victorian EPA Inquiry, 2015

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That the EPA is commonly known as the IPA (Industry Protection Authority), reflects the widely held public view that the EPA is currently a grossly ineffective body – far more successful at letting polluting industry pollute unchecked (even shielding polluting industry from view or criticism), than protecting people or the planet from harmful human activities. It is not just an image problem. Each year, more than 3000 Australians die prematurely as a result of urban air pollution¹. As a resident of the Latrobe Valley who regularly sees acrid smoke belching from coal power station towers and can often 'taste' the smell of brown coal when I return home after leaving the Valley, I have personal experience of the inadequate monitoring and regulation of air pollution in Victoria.

The EPA's shortcomings are largely due to drastic under-resourcing of the EPA, horribly inadequate pollution standards and regulation, and lack of actual authority invested in the EPA to hold polluters to account – particularly large industrial polluters.

I'd like to make the following recommendations:

Firstly, there is a drastic need for the development and implementation of national laws to regulate pollution of air, water and land (eg Air Pollution Prevention Act). These laws should be AT LEAST best practice by world standards and the EPA should be at the forefront of demanding and developing this. Penalties for violating these laws should be greatly increased, and the EPA invested with the power and resources to search, pursue and penalise offenders (and no longer be seen as merely a lame, toothless tiger). Additionally, there should be a right to citizen enforcement of these laws so that communities affected by pollution can take polluters to court. Victorian pollution standards should treat national and international best practice as a minimum requirement.

Secondly, to facilitate this, the EPA's pollution monitoring capacity needs to be greatly increased across the state. The Hazelwood Mine Fire of 2014, and the fact mortality statistics show an average life expectancy for people of the Latrobe Valley of approximately 5 years less than people living in other areas of Victoria, has demonstrated the inadequate location, density and frequency of air pollution monitoring in Victoria. Monitoring must include permanent, widespread, frequent and densely located monitoring equipment across the state, particularly in pollution hot-spots (like the Latrobe Valley). Monitoring, reporting and regulating should not be contracted out, and DEFINITELY NOT left for industry to self-monitor as currently happens far too often. The EPA should have the authority to enter and randomly check polluting industries/businesses without notice. This will require a significant increase in funding, but will no doubt save the community money in the long run through lower costs associated with health impacts and potentially irreversible environmental degradation.

Thirdly, all pollution monitoring should be made public in real time to allow affected residents to act appropriately. This should include information on specific polluters.

¹ Begg, Vos, Barker, Stevenson, Stanley & Lopez, The burden of disease and injury in Australia 2003, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Cat. no. PHE 82, Canberra (2007), p234, accessed at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publicationdetail/?id=644246799>

Fourthly, the EPA should play a much more active role in measuring and regulating greenhouse gas emissions, as climate change represents perhaps the greatest ever pollution and health challenge facing the planet.

Finally, environmental justice should be central to the work and focus of the EPA. For instance, for too long, people of the Latrobe Valley, who have provided electricity for the state of Victoria and yet remain one of the most economically disadvantaged regions in the state, have accepted that some illnesses are an inevitable cost of working in and living around coal mines and power stations. An environment justice approach recognises that the burden of environmental pollution often falls upon those least equipped to deal with it (or complain about it).