Latrobe Valley Mine Rehabilitation Commissioner

Overseeing our future – Rehabilitation planning for the Valley and experiences from Germany

Overview of community Q&A

12 December 2018

Morwell Bowls Club

Note: this is not a transcript of the proceedings, actual wording may differ from notes.

Q&A Part 1: Rae Mackay, Latrobe Valley Mine Rehabilitation Commissioner

Q: *Does your rehabilitation planning and strategies include a plan for rehabilitating the waterways, such as Eel Hole Creek?*
A: The LVMRC remit is limited to the mine license areas, and so planning has focused on this. The rehabilitation strategy will need to include rehabilitation impacts on waterways, but general conditions of waterways outside of the license areas are outside of my remit. Waterway condition is the responsibility of regional catchment management authorities.

Q: *What about waterways within mine areas? Do you work with the regional catchment management authorities?*
A: There are interactions between us and the regional catchment management authorities. We work together on potential impacts to waterways and feed this information back into planning. If we find an issue, we will notify the responsible catchment management authority. It is a similar arrangement to our work with Regional Roads Victoria on the Traralgon Bypass – it is outside the mine license, but will have a significant impact on closure and rehabilitation planning, so we work together on troubleshooting potential issues.

Q: *Does your planning include Hazelwood Pondage?*
A: We have an interest in the Pondage, as the water was intended to be used to fill the mine. However, as it is outside the mine license area it is not within my remit.

Q: *Can you comment on the current plans for Hazelwood, is it still envisaged to become a lake connected with the Morwell River? There is a concern that an interconnected system could lead to land slipping and impact on water quality.*
A: ENGIE's preferred option is a full pit lake, but the nature of the connection to the Morwell River has not been defined yet. LVRRS is still conducting its analysis, so we are not yet certain that a full pit lake will be the best option. However, there is currently strong qualitative evidence that a full pit lake is the best option. A full pit lake should not see any slumps leading to significant land movement, but calculations have not been completed on this issue yet. The way in which the lake may be connected to the river is one question that does need answering. It is possible for all river flows to enter and exit the lake. Alternatively, it is possible for the river to be connected to the lake while still maintaining the majority of flows in the river channel that passes around the lake. These two alternatives will need to be examined and an appropriate design prepared.

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Q: *Has there been any consideration of the future skills that will need to be developed to support the rehabilitation efforts?*
A: I am not involved in that space; however, LVA has done a lot of work on this and is continuing to develop their programs in this area. Fed Uni also has a lot of people undertaking studies related to mine closure and rehabilitation. Mine closure and rehabilitation is a field that will provide opportunities right across the country. In recent discussions with representatives in Queensland, I was told that they are looking at rehabilitation for around 200 mine voids in that state alone. It is a field that will have many opportunities in different fields of work for young people to get involved and develop career paths.

Q: *Can you outline at what points in the timeline the mine operators have formal, legal rehabilitation obligations?*
A: They have obligations right now, it is part of their licenses and is within current regulations. It is the nature of the final land uses, and obligations ongoing from these, which is still to be decided. These obligations will be given additional clarity by the regulatory reform project that is currently underway.

Q: *Is it within the LVRRS mandate to formulate a plan around the disposal of power stations? What happens with the power stations will have an impact on the whole Valley. I am concerned that when they are taken down there will be large areas cut off from the public.*
A: LVRRS is not working on anything to do with the power stations – it is not within their authority. Each station has a very different design, and so each will be very different to dismantle. Energy markets are changing, and so it is almost inevitable that they will all be dismantled eventually. Where asbestos is present, we can assume that any asbestos disposal site will be isolated, but that will not form a very large area with restricted access. The area of the power station footprint will be reusable. I am fairly certain there will be practically no areas that will be sterilised and isolated from future use in this region.

Q: *Why doesn't the Commissioner look at whole mine sites? Is this a shortfall in legislation that needs to be fixed?*
A: My role is only concerned with the mine license areas, and is limited to that by the current legislation. If the legislation were changed we would need additional staff to consider anything more than the mine license areas.

Q&A Part 2: Rhonda Hastie, Technical Specialist

Q: *Should we be considering a process in conjunction with LVA to determine what the rehabilitated mine will be used for?*
A: Land use planning is currently underway as part of the LVRRS, through which DELWP is working with Regional Development Victoria and local planning groups to develop options and visions for potential future land uses for the land surrounding the mine pit. One of the main constraints is that if the voids are left empty they will be unstable, and filling them with water is the preferred option for stabilising them. But we should note that there are many potential uses for a lake other than recreational, such as industry and agriculture.

Q: *What is the relationship between instability and the aquifer situation?*
A: Mining in the Latrobe Valley is more focused on dewatering below the coal, whereas in Germany they have to manage their instability by dewatering their overburden. This has caused the German mines to develop a large groundwater deficit, and they are developing plans to rectify this. I don't have any information to hand on their actual heave risks, it is possibly an issue, but their main issue is the large amount of overburden. Draining their overburden creates a large amount of acidic water, and this is managed through allowing the lake to form and groundwater to leach into the lake, which is then treated to manage the acidity levels. They will probably have to treat the lakes for a long time yet, maybe another 20–30 years. Even without the acidity issues, an empty mine void would not be a stable option for the German mines.

Q: *How is the water to fill our pits going to be sourced without impacting on the Gippsland Lakes?*
A: LVRRS is currently working on that, and a study is underway on potential impacts. Any impacts will need to be weighed against geotechnical stability risks. It is worth noting that the mines currently take a lot of water through dewatering, which will need to continue as long as the void is empty. If dewatering will be continuing there will need to be studies on the impact on the aquifer and the region.

Q: *I am concerned that the current estimate of 11–16 years to fill Hazelwood mine is unrealistic; won't it take much longer than that?*
A: The 11–16 years is based on ENGIE's ideal plan, and LVRRS has yet to finish its own assessment. 11–16 years is realistic, based on additional water sources – remember that the power stations currently use a lot of water, and as they close, that water will become available for filling.

Q: *Does the German government feel they've had sufficient return on investment to justify their expenditure on rehabilitation?*
A: I think local communities and municipalities feel that they have. They have embraced the lakes. For example, the Leipzig region has developed a connected lake system, and published suggested itineraries and places of interest for people to discover the 'New Lake Land' within the region. The towns have seized the opportunity to promote their areas and make the most of the rehabilitated areas. At a federal level, with the closure of the State-run mines, the government had no choice but to spend the money on mine rehabilitation to avoid a serious environmental problem.