

# Authorities should treat smoke events as disasters

March 4 2014, by Kate Haggman

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QUT health experts warn air-polluting events like the Morwell fire should be treated as disasters.

Residents of the Victorian town have taken to the streets to demand evacuation and compensation for the weeks-long blaze at the nearby Hazelwood coal mine.

They claim the Victorian Government has not acted quickly enough to inform the community and remove vulnerable residents.

Experts from QUT's Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation (IHBI) say [local authorities](#) around Australia should have clear plans in place to deal with smoke, just as they have plans for dealing with [natural disasters](#) such as floods and cyclones.

Professor Lidia Morawska heads up QUT's International Laboratory for Air Quality and Health, which advises the World Health Organization.

"Breathing is one of our most fundamental physiological functions and we have no choice over air which gets into our lungs," she said.

"Deterioration of [air quality](#) due to an accident or a natural event like a bushfire should be treated as a disaster and dealt with accordingly.

"This includes both authorities and industry - in this case the mining industry - having a long-term plan about how they deal with fires."

The Hazelwood coal mine fire was triggered by a bushfire, a fact that deputy-director of QUT's Centre for Emergency & Disaster Management Dr Paul Barnes said complicates response efforts in Morwell, especially if unfavourable weather conditions hamper firefighting efforts and increase the chances of other bushfires nearby.

"Extinguishing an open cut coal mine, especially when active a long time, requires a different emergency management response to that needed for a bushfire," Dr Barnes said.

"If both occur as part of the same event, we see a greater need for integrated decision-making on a local, regional and state-level.

"This is a complex emergency combining deliberation on fire fighting, industrial safety, environmental health and community resilience."

Environmental epidemiologist Professor Adrian Barnett said disaster management plans for [air pollution](#) events will only become more critical in future as global warming increases the number and severity of bushfires in Australia.

"Perhaps the lack of action is because there's not the same visual association between the disaster and health, as there is when a flood drowns someone or makes them homeless," Professor Barnett said.

"But smoke events can cover a wide area and effect huge numbers of people.

"The risks for an individual are relatively low, but the overall health impacts can be large because so many people are exposed."

Professor Barnett warned swift action by authorities was critical in limiting [health](#) problems caused by smoke events.

"The acute effects of air pollution exposure happen quickly - a recent review in the Lancet of heart failure deaths and hospitalisation due to air pollution found that the strongest impacts were on the day of exposure."

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

Citation: Authorities should treat smoke events as disasters (2014, March 4) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-03-authorities-events-disasters.html>

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