



Literature Review: Community Consultation on Declared Mine Rehabilitation in Victoria, Australia

February 2024

This report was produced by the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority, February 2024.

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Community consultation about the rehabilitation of Victoria's declared mines is ongoing. The Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority will consider updating this document as consultation continues.



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1 Executive Summary

The rehabilitation of Victoria's declared mines is a complex process. Worldwide, there is an increased emphasis being placed on the community's values and aspirations for the future directions of mine rehabilitation.

To inform the understanding of community consultation about mine rehabilitation, this review considers the literature related to community consultation on declared mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley, Victoria, Australia. Given, at time of writing, the only declared mines in Victoria are in the Latrobe Valley, this review focusses on what the Latrobe Valley community has been asked, and the views expressed by those in the Latrobe Valley community about mine rehabilitation.

Consultation is defined as a process of public or stakeholder engagement (Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority Vocabulary, 2023). Literature reviewed included consultations undertaken by government agencies, industry, and not-for-profit and community-led organisations.

Findings of this review demonstrate that community views about mine rehabilitation have been sought in a number of ways in the decade between 2014 and 2023. Recurring themes have been identified in community responses;

- water is precious,
- First Nations views are vital,
- the region's future will prosper,
- a need for a just transition, and
- community conversations should continue.

Community members have reported both a desire to engage and concerns about consultation fatigue. Consultation fatigue can be minimised by meaningful sharing of information between community, industry and government stakeholders.

Recommendations of this review, for consideration by community, industry and government stakeholders in mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley are:

- Recurring themes identified in this review should be used to inform future engagement work on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley. These themes are: water is precious, First Nations views are vital, the region's future



will prosper, just transition, and community conversations should continue.

- Information within this review be used as a baseline in future engagement work on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley, to help reduce consultation fatigue and its consequences.
- Consideration be given to conducting a wider literature review about community engagement on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley and views about the broader transition in the region beyond mine rehabilitation.
- The voices of youth and Traditional Owners be invited into in any community engagement on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley.
- Stakeholders work together to clarify a regional vision and a broad set of desired outcomes, to guide decision makers and the community regarding the direction of mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley.
- In order to avoid consultation fatigue, consider avoiding unnecessary or tokenistic engagement and reviewing existing consultation data prior to undertaking any new consultation on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley.



2 Background

This literature review aims to identify and examine the existing body of knowledge on community consultation in the context of the rehabilitation of declared mines in the Latrobe Valley. Specifically, the review will focus on understanding the questions posed during past (2014 – 2023) community consultations, by government, industry and the MLRA, and the responses provided by the community. The purpose of this review is to provide historic compilation (base case) of:

- the types of questions asked during community consultation,
- community concerns, suggestions, and preferences

and

- identify any gaps or discrepancies in community engagement practices, highlighting areas where further consultation work can be undertaken
- to assist in the prevention of community consultation fatigue

Community consultation plays a crucial role in ensuring that the concerns, perspectives, and aspirations of local communities are considered in decision-making processes related to mine rehabilitation. Understanding current and long-term community values is critical to informing how rehabilitated mines could provide for positive social outcomes. (Murphy, 2015)

The Latrobe Valley, an inland geographic district in the Gippsland region in the state of Victoria, Australia, has been a significant mining region since operations to extract brown coal at Yallourn Power Station began in the 1920s. In 2016, it was estimated that the Latrobe Valley was contributing in excess of 90 per cent of Victoria's energy requirements (LCC, 2016). Since that time, mining has impacted (both positively and negatively) on the environment and communities in the region. The decades of brown coal mining have provided economic opportunities and generated environmental and social challenges.

As the region transitions away from mining, mine rehabilitation is a major part of mine activities and front of mind for the community. Mine rehabilitation is defined as returning land disturbed by mining to a safe, stable, productive and self-sustaining condition that enables beneficial uses of the site and surrounding land (Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority Vocabulary, 2023). Rehabilitation is considered as complete once closure criteria have been achieved and the mine license is surrendered.



A declared mine is defined in the *Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) (Mineral Industries) Act* as a mine or quarry in Victoria declared by the Minister for Resources to have geotechnical or hydrogeological factors that pose a significant risk to public safety, the environment or infrastructure. There are three declared mines in Victoria; Hazelwood, Loy Yang, and Yallourn, with all three mines located in the Latrobe Valley. These mines represent a unique context in which community consultation plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of the region and ensuring the successful restoration of affected areas. By actively engaging with the community, consultation processes aim to gather insights, concerns, and suggestions from residents, enabling them to contribute to the rehabilitation plans and outcomes.

Purpose

By examining the questions asked and the community responses during consultation processes, this review seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge base by providing insights into the concerns and aspirations of the community regarding the rehabilitation of Victoria's declared mines. It also aims to identify any gaps or discrepancies in community engagement practices, highlighting areas where further consultation work can be undertaken. The findings of this review may be valuable for policymakers, mining companies, and community stakeholders involved in mine rehabilitation projects, enabling them to better understand the community's perspectives.

Ultimately, the goal of this literature review is to advance knowledge on community consultation in the rehabilitation of declared mines in the Latrobe Valley, promoting sustainable practices that integrate the voices of the community and inform successful mine rehabilitation outcomes. By recognizing and addressing the concerns and aspirations of the local community, more inclusive and responsible practices can be employed, fostering social acceptance, minimizing conflict, and ensuring the long-term well-being of both the environment and the affected communities.

It is essential mine operators, governments and Latrobe Valley community have a shared long-term vision and set of desired outcomes for rehabilitating the three mine sites over the coming decades (Murphy, 2015). A baseline of knowledge about existing community consultation can contribute to that vision.

The findings of this review will offer insights into the types of questions asked during



community consultation, the concerns and preferences expressed by the community, and the outcomes of these interactions in the context of declared mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley. The information gathered will contribute to the existing knowledge base, highlight any gaps or limitations in current practices, and provide recommendations for improving community engagement processes in relation to mine rehabilitation efforts.



3 Scope

This review will explore questions asked during community consultations and the responses provided by the community regarding mine rehabilitation efforts of declared mines in the Latrobe Valley between 2014 and 2023. This timeframe captures the Hazelwood mine fire (2014) and the subsequent cessation of mine operations at Hazelwood (2017).

The scope of this review encompasses reports, submissions and relevant publications specifically addressing community consultation in the context of mine rehabilitation of declared mines in the Latrobe Valley. The review focuses on understanding the nature and content of community engagement during the consultation processes and the outcomes of these interactions.

The review will analyse questions posed during community consultations and explore key concerns, suggestions and preferences expressed by the community in relation to mine rehabilitation, taking into account social, environmental and economic aspects.

The geographical scope of this review is limited to the Latrobe Valley region, focusing specifically on the declared mines. The review does not extend to non-declared mines or other regions within Victoria.



4 Review of Literature

This review is documented in chronological order.

4.1 The Hazelwood Mine Fire and subsequent Inquiry - 2014

Background

The Hazelwood Mine Fire burned in the Hazelwood coal mine for 45 days in February and March 2014. The fire was caused by embers spotting into the Hazelwood mine from bushfires burning in close proximity to the mine. The fire sent smoke and ash over the town of Morwell and surrounding areas for much of that time and had significant impacts on the Latrobe Valley communities (Gao, 2022).

On 11 March 2014, a day after the fire was declared under control, an independent inquiry into the Hazelwood mine fire was announced. The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry was held from March to September that year. The inquiry was reopened in May 2015 with new areas of investigation. These inquiries triggered many reforms across state and local government, community and industry (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2016).

Consultation details

In August 2015, as part of the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry a number of Mine Rehabilitation consultation sessions were held in venues across the Latrobe Valley. Five facilitated community consultation sessions were held in Traralgon and Morwell. There were 72 participants across the five sessions including representatives from the three coal mines and various community groups. At the Mine Rehabilitation consultation sessions, the two questions asked of participants were:

- Question 1. Long term infrastructure needs / uses for the mines? And
- Question 2. What should be done to achieve this? (MRCC, 2015).

And

- Requested feedback from the Latrobe Valley community about its vision for final land use
- General discussions and feedback



Overall, 25 submissions were made on the subject of mine rehabilitation, with recommendations on topics including research, flooding options, placement of overburden, closure criteria, engagement options and more. (Aberle, Nicholas, 2015) (Langmore, David, 2015). While many submissions came from industry and government stakeholders, ten came from individual community members. Organisations making public submissions included Environment Victoria and the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) (Teague, B., Catford, J., & Roper, A, 2016). GLaWAC is the Registered Aboriginal Party that represents the Gunaikurnai people, the Traditional Owners of the land on which Victoria's declared mines lie.

Individual members of the community expressed a desire for the mine sites to become an asset for the community, by supporting employment, tourism opportunities, and recreational uses, or by creating an attractive landscape and habitat for native flora and fauna. Most public submissions and community consultation recommended the consideration of a wide range of postmining land uses without expressing a definitive preference. The following potential final land uses were identified: vegetation, passive recreation, active recreation, nature reserves, heritage or culture parks, waste management, flood retention structures or water storage, technology industries, education, training and research and power generation from non-coal sources.

Environment Victoria submitted that '[e]ducating the community about what the rehabilitation options are, what is technically feasible and what the risks and opportunities are, is the necessary first step to effective community engagement.' Environment Victoria is an independent and not-for-profit group campaigning for a safe climate, healthy rivers and sustainable living. Their submission stated that the trust of the community is a prerequisite to successful community engagement, and refers to the evidence of Mr Craig Lapsley, Victoria's Emergency Management Commissioner, that 'trust is gained in these situations by developing an understanding of the community being engaged, and then having ongoing discussions. (Teague, B., Catford, J., & Roper, A, 2016)

When conversations turned to general matters, participants expressed concerns about safety, including concern about ensuring the mines are safe and that "what we're breathing is ok", the need for landforms to be made safe and batters stabilised, and the need for separation distances (buffers) to be re-instated between the township of Morwell and the Hazelwood mine. Participants also expressed a feeling that the mines



needed to work together to adopt an integrated approach, and a curiosity about whether there was enough water to fill the holes.

The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry commissioned the analysis of the consultation process. This was published in the *Review of Future Rehabilitation Options for Loy Yang, Hazelwood and Yallourn Coal Mines in the Latrobe Valley Final Report* dated November 2015. The report concluded that the community held aspirations and expectations broader and inclusive of safe, stable and non-polluting.”. This community vision was captured in the following quote: *“Reshaping the Valley to maximise economic and social benefits of rehabilitating the Latrobe Valley mine sites. Important environmental, resource, and heritage values of the region are respected. Opportunities are created and shared with the Latrobe Valley community, transitioning industries and mine operators”* (Murphy, 2015)



4.2 Latrobe Valley Regional Rehabilitation Strategy (LVRRS) – 2019

Background

As part of the Victorian Government's preparation of the Latrobe Valley Regional Rehabilitation Strategy (LVRRS) geotechnical, water and land use planning studies were carried out by technical specialists between 2017 and 2019, considering the regional benefits and risks associated with stabilising the Latrobe Valley mine pits by creating pit lakes. In 2019, feedback was invited on the Latrobe Valley Regional Rehabilitation Strategy in the form of the LVRRS Overview consultation. Drawing on the findings of the technical studies over the preceding three years and the views of stakeholders consulted to date, the *LVRRS Overview* was prepared and community and stakeholders were invited to provide feedback on the overview. This was an open consultation with submissions open between November 2019 and January 2020.

Consultation details

When asked what was important to them when thinking about mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley, key themes from respondents included the desire for rehabilitated mine voids to offer some amenity beyond safety, stability and sustainability and to include economic development and "a positive amenity for the community that contributes to the future social and economic integrity of the region" (LVRRS, 2020). Key themes emerged when participants were asked the question: "What are the most important things Government can do as part of the planning, rehabilitation, and post-rehabilitation stages of the Latrobe Valley coal mines?" The responses centred around transparency, clarity, managing environmental risks, engagement with Traditional Owners, opportunity cost, working in partnership, other rehabilitation options (ie. the need for assessment of rehabilitation options other than the pit lake) and shared vision.

In their submissions, GLaWAC and the Aboriginal Heritage Council both called for GLaWAC's active participation in the mine rehabilitation process (GLaWAC, 2020) (Carter, 2020).



4.3 Latrobe Health Assembly – 2021

Background

Latrobe Health Assembly's Looking Forward Latrobe report was the result of a study undertaken in May-June 2021 which included engaging community members via workshops, interviews and surveys, and reviewing policy documents to inform relevant projects. A six-week process was undertaken to inform a full report. This included engaging over 170 community members through a series of workshops, interviews and surveys, reviewing over 40 policy documents from across relevant departments (including health, education and tourism) and developing four wellbeing principles to inform projects in Latrobe Valley, based on key policy and community feedback.

Consultation details

Of the numerous opportunities and themes identified by participants, 'Our Big Holes' was one theme identified in report. The report found that 54% of people surveyed said they wanted the rehabilitated mines to be spaces for nature and lakes, and 24% of people surveyed said they wanted to see them used for tourism (Latrobe Health Assembly, 2021). Participants wanted to see opportunities maximised from mine rehabilitation to add value to the region for future industry, environment, recreation, tourism, industry, parkland and residential use.



4.4 Researching community perspectives –2021

Background

In 2021, AGL commissioned Federation University to holistically gauge community viewpoints, particularly on the rehabilitation and future use of mine voids and surrounding land after power station closures. The study, titled *Final Mine Void Forms, and Future Land and Water Uses: Researching the Community Perspective*, adopted a multi-method approach. It conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse range of focus groups including community members, Traditional Owners, government officials, farmers, businesspeople and environmentalists (Reeves, *Final Mine Void Forms and Future Land and Water Uses: Researching the Community Perspective*, 2021). The crux of these discussions envisaged the future land and water uses in both the Latrobe Valley and the greater Gippsland region.

Based on the recurrent themes from these interviews, an online survey was further employed to capture the expectations and concerns of the wider community. Importantly, the principal age demographic of 50+ years highlights an under sampling of younger generations, who may hold different views.

Consultation details

The focus group findings illuminated several crucial themes:

- The high value of water as a community resource, and overarching concerns related to its usage in mine rehabilitation.
- Aspirations for a prosperous region, with decision-making driven by the long-term welfare of the community.
- A deeply held belief of the continuous responsibility of governments to advocate for the community's interests.
- An evident need to bridge knowledge gaps, especially regarding water management in dry pits.

The accompanying online survey showed:

- A strong inclination towards the use of land and water for recreational and environmental benefits.



- A collective aspiration for the rehabilitated mines to uplift the Latrobe Valley's reputation while commemorating its past.
- A strong belief that the mine sites should be turned into public assets.

When taken together, the responses indicate a clear community aspiration for post-mining landscapes with high utility. Predominantly, this would be achieved by landscapes that help redress the societal and health burdens of coal mining, whilst still acknowledging the important role the industry played in 20th century development.

Verbatim responses to this report were notable including a Traditional Owners group participant who stated: “For me, the cultural and spiritual aspect of rehabilitating this scar on country is enormous. I don't travel down that freeway ... I go the other way so I don't have to pass that massive scar on country, that really harmful spiritual pit in the ground. To me, I can't even drive past it. It upsets me every time I see it. So, for me it's going to be whatever happens to that pit, it has to be returned to nature, it has to be. It can't remain a great big black hole in the ground, a scar on country like that. So, for me it has to be brought back and I can see a massive amount of ceremony needed to heal that place.” This narrative underscores the importance of continuing to invite the voices of the Gunaikurnai people – the Traditional Owners and Native Title Holders of the Latrobe Valley – into future conversations.



4.5 Parliamentary Inquiry into the Closure of Hazelwood and Yallourn Power Stations - 2021

Background

The Legislative Council's Economy and Infrastructure Committee conducted an inquiry in February and March 2022 into the closure of the Hazelwood and Yallourn Power Stations. The inquiry investigated the impact of the closure of the Hazelwood and Yallourn power stations, and the effect on the economy and jobs within the Latrobe Valley. This inquiry acknowledged the concerns and expectations of the community, and highlighted views about the challenges and opportunities faced by the region in transitioning to a more sustainable future. Similarly, the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority reported in 2021 that participants in their *Mineland Chats* series had expressed an interest in positive economic outcomes. The participants' preference was for final landforms which were productive, useful and attractive in addition to safe, stable and sustainable (MLRA, 2021).

Consultation details

The inquiry received a total of 63 submissions from representatives spanning communities, industry and government. These included individual community members, and community and advocacy groups. The Great Latrobe Park Inc., which champions the appropriate rehabilitation of the Latrobe Valley open cut coal mines, proposed a range of ideas for their vision of how the future land could be repurposed and used by the community and tourists. These ideas included a Great Gippsland Bike Trail to link the Moe-Yallourn Rail Trail, the Morwell Traralgon shared pathway and the Gippsland Plains Rail Trail (Great Latrobe Park, 2021). The submission also suggested mine viewing points and information centres at Yallourn, Hazelwood and Loy Yang mines, proffering that these centres would help to increase public knowledge and understanding of the size of the mine rehabilitation projects being undertaken. This submission also included a vision that the responsibility for mine licensees to rehabilitate their sites to achieve safe, stable and sustainable final landforms be broadened to include 'visually attractive' and 'economically valuable' to ensure the sites do not "become enormous, useless, unattractive wastelands."

Beyond economic and environmental matters, the community's health and wellbeing were paramount and memories of the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire and its



aftermath were still fresh, with a Latrobe Health Advocate spokesperson expressing, "the top five aspirations I have heard from the community are: mental health and wellbeing, access to services, social inclusion, healthy lifestyles and safe environment" (Anderson, 2021). In addition, it was also stated that: "Local communities could be further supported if there was greater visibility and a proactive sharing from government of the health advice that is being provided and the government interactions that do occur to ensure human health is protected".

At the inquiry Augustin Honorat, CEO of Engie, spoke of the organisation's vision to rehabilitate the Hazelwood mine by filling the mine void with water and emphasize the community's preference for this option. Mr Honorat stated that the community had communicated it wanted Engie to deliver a full pit lake through stakeholder surveys conducted over the preceding five years (Erdogan, 2022).

Also at the inquiry, the secretary of the Latrobe Valley Sustainability Group expressed the desire for positive mine rehabilitation outcomes and clearly stated that "we do not want to be left with great holes in the ground."



4.6 First Nations Survey – 2021

Background

In 2021, Environment Victoria undertook a survey of the Latrobe Valley First Nations community which included questions relating to global warming, new industries and mine rehabilitation. The survey was sent directly to Environment Victoria’s community contacts and received 42 responses.

At the time of publication of this review, the results of this survey are unpublished.

Consultation details

In response to the question “What do you know about what they are doing with (Latrobe Valley mine rehabilitation)?” 27 respondents either left the field blank or responded with negative responses (e.g., “Nothing”, “Not much”, “Not sure.”) Five respondents indicated that they were aware of conversations about a potential pit lake outcome.

The most common words found in responses to the question “What would you like to see happen with Latrobe Valley mine rehabilitation?” were “parks” (5 responses,) “trees/bush” (5 responses,) “nature” (3 responses,) “Culturally significant areas” (2 responses) and “water/lake” (2 responses.)

Responses to the question “How do you think Gunaikurnai and the broader Aboriginal community should be engaged in these issues?” showed a desire for further and more meaningful engagement. The most common words found in responses to this question were “consult/consultation” (9 responses,) “inform/information” (4 responses) and “have a say” (3 responses.)



4.7 MRSDA Feedback – 2022

Background

In 2022 the Victorian government invited feedback into the *Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) (Mineral Industries) Amendment Regulations*. This provided an opportunity for the public and industry to provide feedback to help shape new regulations for Victoria's coal mine land and how the sites might be rehabilitated. Between October 2020 and February 2022, workshops were held with coal mine operators impacted by the proposed regulations to assess impacts. This was an open consultation with submissions open between July and August 2022.

Consultation details

As part of the consultation process, 56 public submissions were received.

The summary of issues raised in the consultation process stated that submissions generally expressed views that the regulations should provide for meaningful engagement with stakeholders, with the most common theme being the importance of genuine, ongoing stakeholder consultation and engagement.

Multiple submissions requested the extension of consultation timeframes to allow community members sufficient time to consider and respond to rehabilitation plans. A total of 56 submissions were recorded on the public consultation page. Of these, 19 submissions came from individual community members and community groups. The remaining submissions were submitted by industry bodies and businesses.



4.8 Water Is life roadmap - 2022

Background

In September 2022, the Victorian government released the *Water is Life: Traditional Owner Access to Water Roadmap*. This document was promoted by the Victorian Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) as a framework to create and maintain a balance between Traditional Owner self-determination in water access, and management and the rights and entitlements of irrigators and landholders, environmental groups and the community. This document included a statement from GLaWAC about their desire to be central to all discussions regarding relevant water as declared mines close (The State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, 2022).

Consultation details

That same year, Environmental Justice Australia (EJA) made a submission to DEECA in support of the Water is Life Roadmap. EJA is a public interest environmental law practice, based in Melbourne which acts primarily for community organisations and non-government organisations on matters concerning environment and natural resources law and policy. EJA lists coal mine rehabilitation among its key priorities.

In its submission, EJA's overall assessment of the roadmap was that it contained promising propositions embedded features of the status quo, especially in relation to the "prevailing system of water rights and entitlements, including their existing distribution remain[ing] unaffected." (Lindsay, Bruce, 2022). EJA sought the achievement of water redistribution, capacity building, and the addressing of "over-allocation and degraded water systems" which they associated with the closure of the Latrobe Valley brown coal mines. (Lindsay, Bruce, 2022).



4.9 Industry Engagement - 2022

Background

Latrobe Valley mine licensees undertake engagement with community through various mechanisms including through their Environmental Review Committees.

In December 2022, as part of the Hazelwood Rehabilitation Project Environment Effects Statement (EES), Engie Hazelwood released a consultation plan which detailed their consultation and feedback to date. An EES is an assessment of the potential environmental impacts or effects of a project, under the Victorian Environment Effects Act. It is requested by the Minister for Planning and allows a government to make decisions about whether a project should proceed. An EES usually includes a description of the proposed development, an outline of public and stakeholder consultation undertaken during investigations and the issues raised, and a description of the existing environment that may be affected.

The Hazelwood EES examines the proposal to fill the Hazelwood mine void with 637GL of water to a maximum depth of 116m (covering 1,145 hectares) using predominately groundwater, surface water and any other approved water sources. The other two declared mine licensees, Energy Australia (Yallourn) and AGL (Loy Yang) have declared their intention to rehabilitate their mine sites in a similar way.

Consultation details

Engie Hazelwood's consultation plan relating to the EES included an outline of community views received about the project including:

- Water sources for the full mine lake are an area of concern, and communities and stakeholders want more information on what water sources will fill the mine void, how fill will be managed in periods of wet and dry conditions, and the feasibility of alternative water sources.
- Water quality of the mine lake and how it will be used are also top of mind for many community members and stakeholders.
- Protecting cultural heritage values of the wider Latrobe River system, including Ramsar wetlands, and water entitlements of existing water users are also a high priority (Forrester, J, 2022)



4.10 A plan for transition – 2022

Background

In 2022, the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA) was tasked by the Victorian Government to work with the people of Gippsland to develop a Transition Plan to set out a vision for the region as it undergoes change in key sectors, including energy, forestry and agriculture. The LVA was established in November 2016 to support the region through sustainable economic transition. The Latrobe Valley and Gippsland Transition Plan was released in July 2023 after twelve months of engagement with Traditional Owners, local industry, business networks, local governments, peak organisations, unions, community organisations and locals.

Consultation details

A broad-ranging document, the Transition Plan included reference to energy workforce transition as well as mine rehabilitation. Responses and views voiced in the plan expressed a desire for safe, stable and sustainable landforms, and the need to ensure the rehabilitation of the Latrobe Valley mine sites are informed by community aspirations (Latrobe Valley Authority, 2023).



4.11 Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority Community Consultation - 2023

Background

The Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority (MLRA) is an independent authority working with community, industry and government to facilitate the rehabilitation of Victoria's declared mine sites. Established in June 2020, to replace the Latrobe Valley Mine Rehabilitation Commissioner, the creation of the authority was recommended by the 2015 Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry. The MLRA undertakes various community consultations about the rehabilitation of Victoria's declared mines.

Consultation details

In their January – March 2023 Quarterly Report, the MLRA reported that in community consultations, “people expressed a desire to see the Latrobe Valley's contribution to Victoria's economic prosperity acknowledged.” Participants in the MLRA's consultations mentioned the estimated financial value of the quantities of brown coal mined from the Latrobe Valley since mining had commenced, and this value was seen as a source of pride. “But when juxtaposed against the low socio-economic statistics of many of today's Latrobe Valley residents it was a point of sadness.” This point was not about the seeking of reckoning; rather, the desire for recognition and opportunity to thrive in the Latrobe Valley's post-coal future” (MLRA, 2023).

In the same report, participants spoke of an awareness of the socio-economic status of residents of the Latrobe Valley, including statistics about the health, employment, housing and mental health status of Latrobe Valley residents in comparison to other local government areas. Participants wanted to see mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley act as an opportunity for people's lives to be improved through employment, education, tourism and ensuring an attractive environment to be proud of. This echoed the views expressed in the *Federation University Final Mine Void Forms, and Future Land and Water Uses: Researching the Community Perspective Final Report* where respondents said, “This is such an opportunity ... instead of seeing it as an issue, it's really an opportunity.”



4.12 The Next Economy: Elevating and expanding the conversation – 2023

Background

The Next Economy is a non-government organisation established in 2018. It aims to support communities struggling with economic change to stimulate their economy in ways that protect and regenerate both people and planet. The Next Economy staff conduct research and contribute to economic planning initiatives across Australia, with a particular focus on the coal regions of Central Queensland, the Hunter Valley and the Latrobe Valley. In early 2023, The Next Economy gathered a representative group of community leaders and residents from across the Latrobe Valley to explore perspectives among community leaders with regards to the energy transition. They worked with 31 community leaders and residents to explore their perspectives on the energy transition through the ‘What next? Community leadership for a positive transition’ project. The idea for the project emerged after a range of community, government and industry representatives expressed concerns that community views were under-represented in formal transition planning activities, despite the substantial planning efforts and investment in transition since the Hazelwood Power Station closure in 2017. In response, The Next Economy, with funding from Environment Victoria, engaged with a diverse group of community leaders and local residents to understand their views regarding:

- What good energy transition processes and outcomes look like;
- Where progress has been achieved and energy transition challenges remain in the Latrobe Valley; and
- Initiatives and actions that could contribute to better transition process and outcomes.

Consultation details

The project drew out a range of community perspectives from a series of interviews and workshops.

Throughout the consultation, participants shared that they were keen to elevate and expand the conversation around mine rehabilitation. They sought to be actively involved in the decisions and actions that shape the future of the region’s natural assets and would like to see the development of a shared vision of a regenerative future for the region’s land, air and waterways.



The main project finding relating to mine rehabilitation was the desire for stronger environmental protections, sustainable and creative solutions to mine site rehabilitation and repurposing, and greater support for Traditional Owner leadership (Lumsden. L., Bell, J., Webb, L., Bailey, O., Cahill, A, 2023). Perhaps the most salient single statement from the project was the assertion “We will know we are achieving a good energy transition when the Latrobe Valley coal mines have been beautifully rehabilitated.”

Participants also raised the importance of the positive role that Traditional Owners could play in improving the health of land and local water systems, and the need for effective strategies for communicating with members of the community.

Participants identified various actions to encourage greater community engagement including:

- Dedicated funding for community-led rehabilitation.
- Further engagement between the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority and the broader community.
- Further learning for the community about the issues and considerations and the pros and cons of different mine rehabilitation options; and creating space for ideas and proposals to be tabled by different groups so they can be formally responded to.
- Additional resources for self-determined leadership of Traditional Owners across all aspects of planning and management of environmental protection, and rehabilitation efforts.
- Greater opportunities for Traditional Owners to determine how they want to be involved in water management across the region.
- Research on the options for environmentally sustainable ash pond remediation
- Integrating relevant educational activities across curriculum.



5 Consultation fatigue

Consultation fatigue arises as people are approached more and more often to participate but perceive little response, or action, from this participation. Consultation fatigue has been defined as a combination of an excess of consultation activities and a failure to deliver on projects that have been consulted on previously (Richards, C., Blackstock, K.L. & Carter, C.E, 2004).

Latrobe Valley community members have reported a desire to engage but concerns about over-consultation in relation to mine rehabilitation (Latrobe Health Advocate, 2019). Community members report feelings of consultation fatigue and perceptions of having been over analysed, without bringing about meaningful change (Cameron, 2005), (Reeves, J., Morgan, D., Reimers, V., Green, M., & Baumgartl, T., 2022).

Areas that have been declared Renewable Energy Zones and areas where mining activities take place, both criteria of which apply to the Latrobe Valley, have been recognised as communities experiencing higher rates of consultation fatigue (Aberle, 2023). If people are feeling fatigued or saturated with consultation or survey processes, it does not mean that they will not want to be involved with such processes at a later time (Rozen, 2015/16 Hazelwood Mine Fire Enquiry Transcript, Wednesday 9 December 2015, 2015).

Community members in more recent consultations noted that historically they perceived limited space for open and safe dialogue with industry organisations and government bodies, with regard to regional transition and mine rehabilitation. Despite this, they would like to see more opportunities for community conversations (Lumsden, L., Bell, J., Webb, L., Bailey, O., Cahill, A, 2023).

When addressing consultation fatigue, there is an argument for recognising that not all processes are amenable to participation and that the wider public do not expect to take part in all decisions. When undertaking consultation work, there is an argument for first asking what the community has already said on the topic and acting on that data (Richards, C., Blackstock, K.L. & Carter, C.E, 2004).



6 Discussion

Many community views about mine rehabilitation have been sought and expressed in the decade between 2014 and 2023.

Multiple recurring themes on community consultation regarding declared mine rehabilitation in Victoria have been identified in this review;

- **Water is precious.** Water in mine rehabilitation is an issue of focus in the community. Understanding variable rainfall and streamflow and ensuring that supply and demand are balanced against a backdrop of a changing climate are key priorities.
- **First Nations views are vital.** Communities are repeatedly saying that the views and values of the Gunaikurnai people have a pivotal role to play in guiding the rehabilitation of mined areas.
- Ensure that **the region's future will prosper.** The community continues to express a desire for economic opportunities arising from mine rehabilitation and transition.
- A **just transition.** Community consultations raise issues of justice. Latrobe Valley community members feel that 'their' brown coal mines have "kept the lights on" for Victoria for many decades. Now that it's time for rehabilitation, they do not want to see their communities left behind; and
- a desire that **community conversations should continue.** Community members want to be actively involved in the decisions and actions that shape the future of the region's natural assets.

Academic studies indicate that consultation fatigue can be minimised by meaningful sharing of information between community, industry and government stakeholders so that there is an understood field of knowledge on community views on key topics.

Significant information is available about how the Latrobe Valley community has been engaged about mine rehabilitation between 2014 and 2023. Existing community views can be better understood and used in decision making with an awareness of what the community has already been asked, and what the community has already said can help.



6.1 Recommendations

Recommendations of this review, for consideration by community, industry and government stakeholders in mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley are:

- Recurring themes identified in this review should be used to inform future engagement work on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley. These themes are: water is precious, First Nations views are vital, the region's future will prosper, just transition, and community conversations should continue.
- Information within this review be used as a baseline in future engagement work on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley, to help reduce consultation fatigue and its consequences.
- Consideration be given to conducting a wider literature review about community engagement on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley and views about the broader transition in the region beyond mine rehabilitation.
- The voices of youth and Traditional Owners be invited into in any community engagement on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley.
- Stakeholders work together to clarify a regional vision and a broad set of desired outcomes, to guide decision makers and the community regarding the direction of mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley.
- In order to avoid consultation fatigue, consider avoiding unnecessary or tokenistic engagement and reviewing existing consultation data prior to undertaking any new consultation on mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley.



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