

June 30, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to make a Clean Air for All Victorians submission.

I am a rural generalist doctor based in Bairnsdale, East Gippsland.

In my rural community, the primary source of air pollution is **wood fire smoke** from **domestic wood fire heaters** and **planned burns**. Domestic wood fire smoke can cause a significant pollution burden throughout the winter months. Planned burns can cause very significant air pollution (which can often be observed across large areas of the state) over a more concentrated period of time.

I believe that **wood fire smoke is a significant health hazard** in my community which is **not being addressed** at present in any significant way.

Many residents of East Gippsland have relatively low health literacy (along with low socioeconomic status) and generally have little understanding of the health effects of wood fire smoke.

In many towns, including Bairnsdale, the majority of houses have wood fire heaters. Access to wood is relatively easy. Collecting firewood is a popular pastime in April and May. Firewood permits were in place until the former State Liberal Government removed them.

Many older and more cheaply built houses have very poor insulation and thus require constant heating, causing much more air pollution.

### **Health effects of wood fire smoke**

It is increasingly recognised in extensive [research findings](#) that wood fire smoke is a significant pollutant which causes significant damage to human health.

A [longitudinal cohort study](#) just released in the Lancet demonstrated that particulate air pollution contributed to 3.2 million new cases of diabetes world wide in 2016 - an association which few would have predicted. "Ten or 15 years ago, we thought that air pollution caused pneumonia, asthma and bronchitis and not much more than that," Dr. Philip Landrigan, dean for global health at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York, commented to CNN after its release. "We now know that air pollution is a very important cause of heart disease and stroke and contributes to chronic lung disease, lung cancer and chronic kidney disease."

Earlier in 2018, [an observational study from Tasmania](#) identified PM2.5 pollution as a significant risk factor for heart failure, even at very low levels.

Burning of firewood contributes to climate change. [It is not 'environmentally neutral'](#).

The financial costs associated with wood fire smoke pollution are likely to be even higher than previously estimated, given the new findings above.

### **The National Clean Air Agreement**

I note the [mid term report](#) of the National Clean Air Agreement. The standards set are meaningless for rural communities where EPA VIC conducts no air quality monitoring. In any case, [the Victorian Auditor-General's findings regarding the deficiencies in EPA Victoria's air quality monitoring](#) cast serious doubt on the validity of EPA Victoria's data.

The mid term report gives the false impression that progress is being made in Victoria. It refers to 'emissions standards' for wood heaters which are highly problematic and illusory. Please refer to the extensive references in Dorothy Robinson's document, attached.

Education programs have been ineffective to date. [Wood heater owners in similar communities have been very reluctant to embrace change.](#)

### **What can Victorian residents currently do about local wood fire smoke pollution?**

EPA Victoria directs us to raise residential wood smoke issues with our neighbours. The responsibility for dealing with wood fire smoke in the first instance is delegated to the individuals who are suffering from pollution.

My personal experience has been as follows:

I have found the two neighbours I have contacted to be strongly resistant to any suggestions I have, and even verbally abusive. The Shire of East Gippsland, I regret to say, has not been helpful: "Wood fires are legal - there's nothing we can do." I have found my local Shire very reluctant to take any sort of action.

Ultimately, EPA Victoria and the Shire of East Gippsland currently offer the local population minimal protection from wood fire smoke.

### **What needs to change?**

- **Public education regarding the health (and climate) effects of wood fire smoke needs to be dramatically improved.**
- **Strategies should be developed to assist rural populations with better housing insulation.**
- **The EPA must be given a broader mandate to deal with residential / non industrial pollution, including wood heaters.**
- **The EPA should conduct improved air quality monitoring in areas identified as pollution hot spots, including many more rural areas.**
- **The sale of new wood fire heaters should be banned.**
- **Old wood fire heaters should be phased out as soon as practicable (though some form of buyback scheme or other mechanism).**
- **Firewood permits should be restricted and phased out.**
- **The EPA should monitor the health impacts of planned burns conducted by FFM / DELWP.**
- **The EPA, Shires and Councils must be made accountable for protecting the Victorian population from particulate air pollution.**
- **Relevant public health experts must be invited to the Clean Air Summit.**

I await the Clean Air Summit with interest and hope for significant changes which will give Victorians protection from wood fire smoke and other sources of particulate pollution.

Yours sincerely

Dr Rob Phair

BA MBBS FACRRM

Rural Doctors Association of Victoria committee member