
UPPER HUNTER AIR QUALITY MONITORING NETWORK (UHAQMN) – ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MEETING MINUTES – Meeting 14

Date: 16 October 2014

Time: 10:00am – 1:00pm

File: EF13/5718 DOC14/248674-02

Meeting Location: Singleton Library Meeting Room

In attendance: John Tate (Chairperson), Scott Brooks, Dr Craig Dalton, Craig Flemming, Lyn MacBain, Geoffrey Sharrock, Bev Smiles, Andrew Speechly, John Watson

Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH): Matt Riley, Lori Warren

Environment Protection Authority (EPA): Sylvia Bell, Adam Gilligan, Leanne Graham

Apologies: Cr Wayne Bedggood, Dr Catherine Chicken, Dr Suzanne Laucht, Cr Sue Moore, Wendy Wales

Agenda Item:

1. Acknowledgement of Country

2. Welcome and Introductions

Mr Tate welcomed attendees and introduced Ms Bell, Director of Stakeholder Engagement and Governance, EPA; Mr Gilligan, Manager Hunter Region, EPA; and Ms Warren, Senior Climate and Atmospheric Scientist, OEH.

3. Apologies (see above)

4. Previous Meeting Minutes and Actions

The Committee members adopted the minutes from the meeting of 31 July 2014.

Responding to Recommendations and Actions of previous meetings:

- OEH provided a draft discussion paper on a proposed method to assess the need for new air quality monitors for the Network. OEH requested feedback by 30 November 2014.
- EPA to facilitate a discussion about ways that air quality information could be made more accessible to the community (refer to Item 8 below).
- Mr Brooks informed the Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) that the Committee recommended public reporting of improvements to blast fume management plans and similar changes to management procedures. Mr Brooks advised that the DPE had decided to refer to the recommendation in the DPE's Annual Report. Mr Brooks would notify the Committee when the Annual Report is published.
- Ms Bell (Director Stakeholder Engagement) and Committee members discussed communicating air quality issues in the Hunter Valley (refer to Items 7 and 8 below).
- OEH will email the draft UHAQMN Annual Report 2013 to Committee members, but asked that the draft report not be circulated further. OEH, in liaison with EPA, will inform the Committee, media and wider community when the Annual Report is published.

Ms Bell outlined standard procedures for informing the media about the launch of online publications and other events.

- Mr Brooks provided a summary of the DPE's response to the blast fume event in February 2014. Mr Gilligan advised that the EPA's investigation continues and the Committee will receive an update when the investigation is completed. The EPA is developing blast fume conditions for mines' environment protection licences.
- OEH has commenced provision of near-real time monitoring data to mine operators to complement existing methods of estimating dust risk. Mines receive meteorological and air quality data within an hour.
- EPA emailed to Committee members, on 10/10/14, the web link to the Hunter Valley dust forecasting tool developed for the Australian Coal Association Research Program.

ACTION 1: Committee to provide feedback to OEH by 30 November 2014, on the draft discussion paper on a proposed method to assess the need for new air quality monitor for the Network.

ACTION 2: Mr Brooks to notify the Committee on the publication of the Department of Planning and Environment Annual Report 2014.

ACTION 3: OEH to email to the Committee the draft UHAQMN Annual Report 2013.

5. Community Feedback

EPA circulated media articles published since the previous meeting that referred to the Network or the Committee.

The Chair deferred community feedback from Committee until General Business (Item 9 below).

6. Network Performance Report and Seasonal Analysis

Mr Riley reported on the Network's performance for the winter period 1 June to 31 August 2014, providing details of the Network's operation and data capture and monitoring results.

All monitors achieved 95% data capture, or better, with the exception of the Muswellbrook NO₂ monitor, which achieved 89% data capture due to problems with the sensor, following a power failure on 3 July 2014 and pump failure on 5 August 2014.

Concentrations for NO₂ and SO₂ were below the benchmark across the Network during the reporting period.

PM₁₀ levels did not exceed the daily benchmark of 50 µg/m³ at the larger population centres. PM₁₀ levels above the benchmark were recorded on one day at Camberwell (53.5 µg/m³ on 24 June 2014) and one day at Mount Thorley (50.8 µg/m³ on 9 July 2014), under predominantly north-westerly winds.

PM_{2.5} levels did not exceed the daily benchmark of 25 µg/m³ at Singleton. Muswellbrook recorded two days above the benchmark (27.4 µg/m³ on 4 July 2014 and 25.4 µg/m³ on 5 August 2014), under light southerly winds.

Ms Warren presented a seasonal analysis for the winter period, June to August 2014. The Upper Hunter experienced average winter rainfall in 2014, with 25 mm to 50 mm more rain than 2013, potentially contributing to better air quality. Rainfall totals were similar to winter 2012.

Maximum and minimum temperatures were above average for winter in 2014. Winter winds showed the typical along-valley flows, with dominant NW sector winds.

Mr Riley noted that the graphs of 30 day rolling average particle concentrations continued to show seasonal variations, with generally lower levels of PM₁₀ in winter. PM_{2.5} levels suggested the influence of woodsmoke in winter, with distinct peaks at Muswellbrook and lower peaks at Singleton. Camberwell PM_{2.5} levels showed less seasonal variation in PM_{2.5}. These results were consistent with the findings of the Upper Hunter Valley Particle Characterisation Study.

Mr Riley welcomed ongoing feedback on the report and the analysis.

In discussion, the Committee requested that OEH considered the following additions to the report:

- title page and table of contents,
- information on drought factor,
- comparison of seasonal winds with previous years, and
- annual rolling averages for particle concentrations.

In conclusion, the Chair noted the report and thanked Mr Riley and Ms Warren.

ACTION 4: EPA to provide the Committee with access to the report by Holmes Air Sciences, showing Upper Hunter air flow patterns.

ACTION 5: OEH to consider the following additions to the seasonal report:

- title page and table of contents,
- information on drought factors,
- comparison of seasonal winds with previous years, and
- annual rolling averages for particle concentrations.

7. Briefing – Findings of the Lower Hunter Community Research Project, a study that investigated how the EPA can better communicate messages on air quality

Ms Bell outlined the method and the findings of the project. The project developed from discussion with the Newcastle Community Consultative Committee on the Environment (NCCCE), to investigate the concerns of a wide range of communities across the Lower Hunter, regarding air quality and to how to improve access to and understanding of air quality information. Macquarie University successfully tendered for the project. John Tate participated on the selection committee, as Chair of NCCCE.

The study engaged approximately 400 people in face to face interviews and focus group meetings. Participants represented all age groups, including students from primary, secondary and technical and further education, and the elderly, from the local government areas of Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Port Stephens, Maitland and Cessnock.

Key findings included:

- Those who were most concerned about air quality were middle aged and older people living in Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Maitland and Cessnock. These people perceived air quality as a moderately serious issue and air quality monitoring and controls as inadequate.
- Responses to the question, “Do you trust that information provided on air quality gives the whole picture?”, were Yes 17.5%, No 44.0%, Not sure 19.6%, and no response 18.9%.
- People preferred to receive air quality information from television, newspapers and radio.

Ms Bell noted that the draft report is currently being reviewed by the research cohort and would be published on the EPA website in November. EPA would work with NCCCE to find ways to engage better on air quality issues with communities, industries and government.

The Chair thanked Ms Bell for the presentation and deferred discussion to the next agenda item.

8. Discussion - How the EPA and OEHL can make information on air quality more accessible to the communities in the Hunter

Committee members responded to the findings presented by Ms Bell (Item 7 above) and suggested ways of communicating air quality information to the community. Key points included:

- Committee members expressed differing views on the value of undertaking a similar study in the Upper Hunter.
- Regional media would welcome regular reports on air quality.
- Community members have reported that current air quality information is not user-friendly.
- Community members remain confused about the inconsistency between poor visibility and reported air quality.
- Frequent reporting of air quality would address confusion about air quality, for example, quarterly reporting in line with OEHL air quality reporting to the Committee.

Ms Bell advised that the EPA is overhauling its information technology systems to give the community better access to all public reporting. The EPA will keep the Committee informed on developments.

The Chair thanked the Committee for the discussion.

9. General Business

The Chair invited community feedback from the Committee:

Ms MacBain reported that some community members were confused about the messaging used in the OEHL/EPA’s SMS air quality alerts, expecting that the telephone number 131555 would provide information on air quality. Mr Riley explained that the Environment Line, 131555, could provide information, if requested. Ms MacBain suggested that the messaging included a link to the map showing air quality monitoring results.

Ms MacBain also reported that residents had enquired about the possibility of a new air quality monitoring station (AQMS) at Broke. Mr Riley advised that air quality data provided by the Bulga AQMS would be indicative of air quality at Broke. Mr Watson noted that a previous presentation by the EPA addressed the case for a monitoring station at Broke.

ACTION 6: EPA to recap, for the benefit of new Committee members, the justification for no monitoring at Broke as part of the current UHAQMN and the factors that would influence the case for a monitoring station at Broke in future

Mr Flemming reported that he received two calls enquiring about air quality, from residents of Tasmania who were considering accepting offers of employment in the Muswellbrook area.

The Chair invited discussion of other business.

In response to questions raised in discussion about the regulatory responses to air quality alerts:

- Mr Gilligan advised that rather than responding to alerts, the EPA has dedicated officers in the field continuously, investigating dust from mines, especially on days with the potential for poor air quality. The EPA has placed pollution reduction programs on mines' environment protection licences, requiring mines to demonstrate how they are responding to the potential for dust from mining activity in adverse weather conditions.
- Mr Brooks advised that DPE required mines to report immediately when mine-operated monitors exceeded the daily criterion of 50 µg/m³, including reporting on mine activities.
- Ms Smiles identified the value in community reporting of such regulatory action.

Ms Smiles, on behalf of Ms Wales, requested an update on the EPA's progress towards the optimisation of mine-operated air quality monitoring. Mr Brooks responded, in the absence of Mr Bennett, who had provided an update at the previous meeting.

Mr Brooks explained that, before the Network was established, the government and the mines signed a Memorandum of Understanding. It included an agreement for the government to review industry-operated monitoring, once the Network was established. Mr Brooks added that if changes to consent conditions meant that some monitors would be taken away, the mine's would be required to provide adequate monitoring equipment to allow best estimate of dust levels at receivers.

ACTION 7: EPA to update the Committee on progress towards optimising mine-operated air quality monitoring.

Mr Gilligan advised that the EPA had executive support to consider a broader role for the Committee. The EPA would distribute draft Terms of Reference for the Committee to consider.

ACTION 8: EPA to distribute draft Terms of Reference to broaden the role of the Committee, for discussion at the next meeting.

Meeting closed at 1:20 pm.

Next meeting dates: 26 February, 30 April, 30 July, and 29 October 2015.

Minutes reviewed by: John Tate (Chair).