



Minutes

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| Meeting: | Upper Hunter Air Quality Advisory Committee (No 41) | Date: | Friday 27 May 2022 |
| Location: | Charbonnier Hotel, Singleton | Time: | 9.35am – 10.40pm |
| Last Meeting Date: | Wednesday 9 th March 2022 | Next Meeting Date: | Tuesday 23 August 2022 |
| | John Turner – Chairperson Danny Thompson – Singleton Shire Council representative John Krey – community representative Michael White – community representative Catherine Chicken – industry representative Bob Vickers – community representative (online) Gary Mulhearn – coal industry representative Klay March – coal industry representative Tracy Ward – Muswellbrook Shire Council representative (online) Wendy Wales – environmental representative Paul Jakes – Upper Hunter Shire representative Summer Steward – power industry representative David Gathercole – EPA Stephen White – DPE Jamie Ferguson - EPA | | |
| Apologies: | Leanne Graham – DPE Loredana Warren - DPE Matthew Riley – DPE Ned Stephenson – coal industry representative | | |

Agenda items:

1. Introduction

1.1. Welcome, Acknowledgment of Country

The Chair opened the meeting at 9.35am and acknowledged the traditional custodians on the various lands which we are meeting on today, and pay our respects to aboriginal people past, present, and future.

1.2. Present, apologies and declarations of interest

The Chair welcomed the Upper Hunter Air Quality Advisory Committee (the Committee). There were no declarations of interest other than noted previously.

2. Previous Minutes and Outstanding Actions

2.1. Review previous minutes

The previous minutes were adopted by the members present at this meeting.

2.2. Outstanding actions

There were two outstanding actions items.

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| 1 | Provide a final decision on the committee paper regarding a new particle characterisation study |
| 2 | Provide an update on potential changes to the hourly alert system to include a cancellation alert |

2.3. New particle characterisation study

Mr Stephen White Senior Scientist QS & Reporting from DPE responded to the outstanding action pertaining to a final decision by the Department on the committee paper regarding a new particle characterisation study.

Mr S White advised that by the end of June official feedback would be provided, however the Department generally does not consider there is a need. He stated that the sources haven't changed significantly in the past 10-years to a level that would provide overwhelming different results than the previous study, and therefore investment in another similar study wouldn't necessarily result in a return. Mr Stephen White asked the committee for more details for such another such study being done.

Mr Michael White responded that PM2.5 levels in the Upper Hunter on an annual basis consistently sits above 8 ug/m³ and that he considered there was value in assessing contemporary contributions. Mr M White expressed the view that this data is referred to as current, but that an understanding of more contemporary information on where particles are coming from now is required. Since 2012 when the data was collected there's been changes in mining activity, particularly in the upper parts of the Upper Hunter region suggested Mr S White. He also stated that quite a lot of the components have changed but developers and the State are relying on the current data.

Wood smoke was also discussed in relation to PM2.5 levels and improvements made within the local area would not have been captured in this data. Also, off-road and diesel emissions as areas for concern were raised.

Ms Wendy Wales commented that inversions are holding the dust and dirt under those. Ms Wales relayed that her partner has been out of breath some afternoons, and that Muswellbrook is now more situated in a valley and questioned if woodsmoke might now be much higher. Comment made that mining activity around Muswellbrook had changed significantly since 2012.

Mr Danny Thompson stated that as a local government representative, a significant amount of investment and effort had been made in reduction of woodsmoke around town. However, the study from 2012 is used which shows the levels as still significant, and that currently it can't be measured or updated which doesn't assist with community advocacy.

The data has been relied on for a decade stated Ms Catherine Chicken and that there's an assumption around woodsmoke. There was a confounding issue around the placement of air quality monitoring stations near to houses at Muswellbrook. Ms Chicken stated they would be pleased to see a study occur assessing if woodsmoke is the underlying issues. Ms Tracey Ward also commented an interest in knowing what would present in wood smoke studies and asked if it could be confused with spontaneous combustion when analysed and if it could be mining related.

Mr Stephen White comment that looking at the hourly data may provide insight into some of those questions. Ms Wendy Wales made a comment made about the Singleton traffic due to the bypass, expressing the view that there is high value in a particle characterisation study and that without measuring it is hard to improve.

Mr Stephen White stated that data from both Muswellbrook and Singleton did indicate there had been lower levels in last few years and suggested that some of these questions can be answered by examining data DPE have already but that the answers might not lie in another identical study.

Mr S White commented that a study would be expensive, and Mr Thompson asked if the Department could look at alternative sources of funding.

The Chair suggested this discussion be tabled for the committee with a formal emailed (out of session) written reply.

| Action Item No | Action | Person Responsible |
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| 1. | Table formal Department response via email on the topic of a new particle characterisation study | DPE |

2.3 Alerts

A discussion occurred around the topic of alerts.

Ms Wendy Wales commented that spontaneous combustion monitoring would be finished either side of the mine as they consider winding down operations.

On the alerts themselves, Mr S White stated that a survey had been done as part of a general air quality operations review, and that the general feedback indicated that it was a valuable resource. He mentioned that post the bushfires the Department are looking at the updates from live data and look further into how they can best do specific alerts alongside Department of Health advice, and with consistency with other Australian jurisdictions. Comment that there is an issue in actioning the specific request from the last meeting about sending alerts when the concentration dropped back below the threshold. The specific example is similar to a “razor back”, where a concentration which moves frequently above and below the alert threshold will send multiple alerts and potentially result in community getting too many daily alerts (“noise”).

Mr John Krey commented that “noise” is very important and that he was disappointed the Department is still looking into this. That whilst the Hunter Valley has the best air monitoring and alert system, the alert communication hasn’t progressed. He stated it was taking too long and concern if trying to align with the national average.

Mr Gary Mulhearn commented regarding alerts that if they could notify users of the direct URL link to the website and Mr Michael White suggested that perhaps this could be investigated. Mr David Gathercole expressed his agreement that it’s important for the community.

Mr John Krey suggested getting the brief correct and the technical experts will find a solution and to get the topic as standing item for the meeting so this topic can be addressed at the next meeting.

3. EPA Update – standing item

3.1. Q&A for Departments

Mr David Gathercole provided the following updates:

- The EPA has announced a new CEO, Mr Tony Chappel will be joining in August
- Mr Chappel will replace the current interim CEO, Ms Jacqueline Moore
- La Nina has continued to help with dust suppression
- EPA continues monitoring and routine inspections noting COVID did result in some remote inspections
- Bust the Dust remains not implemented during the La Nina cycle, but should conditions change in future dryer months then the campaign could start again
- Comment that coal fired power stations (e.g., Liddel, Eraring, Vales Point and Bayswater) are transitioning and the EPA is in discussion with the licensees and other State agencies around these forecasted closures

- Mentioned the 2025 renewable energy zone for the Hunter region and the transition of the abovementioned coal fired power stations
- Update on the Wickham Fire recovery and clean-up, with over 580 residential properties assessed and appropriately cleaned. Airborne asbestos monitoring was established in affected areas from 1 March 2022. Based on airborne asbestos monitoring and site assessments, there is no evidence to indicate that the community has been exposed to airborne asbestos fibres above background levels from the Wool Store Fire. Monitoring results can be found on City of Newcastle's website
- Mr John Krey asked in relation to coal fired power stations closing what percentage of coal is currently going to power stations and what this means for local industry. Mr D Gathercole responded that he would take the question on notice but commented that they are starting to diversify due to various demands.

| Action Item No | Action | Person Responsible |
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| 2. | EPA to seek response to the questions around what percentage of coal mined in the Upper Hunter is for local industry and what percentage is for the export market | David Gathercole - EPA |

4. Air Quality Monitoring Network Seasonal newsletter – standing item

4.1. Air quality in the Upper Hunter: Summer 2020-21 newsletter

Mr S White offered an apology on behalf of Ms Loredana Warren whom he acknowledged had prepared the Upper Hunter: Summer 2020-21 newsletter. Mr S White then presented on the newsletter, including the following points:

- In general air quality over this period has been good
- Lowest levels in past 10-years
- Upper Hunter experienced average to slightly above average rainfall during summer this period
- Including Merriwa PM2.5 air quality in the statistics (noted: whilst not funded via the network) informative for the committee.

Mr S White pointed out that all stations recorded rolling annual average PM10 and PM2.5 levels below the annual equivalent benchmarks, with most recording the lowest since the network began operation. With regards to NO₂ and SO₂ the hourly and daily average time series also remained below the benchmarks.

He made the comparison between annual NO₂ concentrations in Western Sydney, Lower Hunter and Muswellbrook levels. This graph was not included in the report, but was presented as available, partly because the updated annual standard for NO₂ has dropped from 30 ppb to 15 ppb, which is closer to what is measured now. Mr Bob Vickers made the comment that Muswellbrook and Sydney are not equivalent as the sources are drastically different, as outlined in the characterisation study: NO₂ in Western Sydney is driven by a considerably higher density of traffic in contrast to Muswellbrook where this is driven to a larger degree by power station emissions which are not a factor in Sydney. Mr S White agreed that the sources are not comparable, only the concentrations.

4.2. Network performance

Mr S White commented that Muswellbrook SO₂ and NO₂ instruments had a fault for 2 months during summer, and his displeasure that it took 2 months to be picked up, given its importance and the fact this was the first summer since the more stringent (current) SO₂ standards were implemented. Mr M White enquired if the result of this outage whether alert process had changed. The reply from Mr S White was that he has actioned an enquiry to look into the situation to see what processes could be improved. Mr S White revised that it was not the instrument being offline or alarm, but that it was an error which resulted in invalidation of data required after collection.

Ms Catherine Chicken commented that overall, performance has been good.

Mr S White stated he also believed he could retrieve the Singleton NO₂ data through post-processing.

Ms Wendy Wales stated surprise that there wasn't any SO₂ levels over the new standard during the season given her experiences, and that it wasn't clear in the newsletter summary that this outage occurred. Mr White agreed and advised they would update the newsletter to highlight the SO₂ Muswellbrook issue to the summary to be more prominent

| Action Item No | Action | Person Responsible |
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| 3. | Mr Stephen White to update the Summer 2021 Newsletter to address the NO ₂ /SO ₂ Muswellbrook outage within the summary. | DPE – Stephen White |

5. Upper Hunter Air Quality Monitoring Network Review

5.1 UHAQMN 5-year review update

Mr S White acknowledged the feedback and the additional survey feedback and thanked the committee, stating that this was being reviewed and a response from the Department would be forthcoming at the next meeting that incorporated collectively the first round of committee feedback, the independent audit, and the second round of committee feedback.

6. Department questions and updates

6.1. POEO Clean Air Regulation Consultation

Mr M White asked about the POEO clean air regulation consultation and the invitation that was sent to the committee for feedback. Mr John Turner suggested there was not enough time for the committee to provide collective feedback. Mr David Gathercole advised information on the consultation was on the EPA's website should committee members want to make a submission. Request Mr J Ferguson share the consultation web link with the committee.

| Action Item No | Action | Person Responsible |
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| 4. | Mr Ferguson to email a web link to consultation. | Jamie Ferguson - EPA |

7. General Business

7.1. EPA Roadshows

Mr Ferguson advised that the EPA's Newcastle forum was well attended, and thanked committee members had attended. He advised that next week a forum was in Port Macquarie, followed by Ballina and Gunnedah. Ms Wendy Wales asked for the date for Gunnedah. Mr D Gathercole also thanked attendees and commented that the sessions have been very valuable. Mr Paul Jakes who attended the Newcastle session stated he had found the forum very constructive and useful, noting it was good to hear the EPA was outcomes focussed. Ms C Chicken also stated this was very encouraging.

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| 5. | Mr Ferguson to email a web link with the details with the upcoming Roadshow dates. | Jamie Ferguson - EPA |

7.2. Next meeting August 2022

The Chair closed the meeting.