Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

7 March, 2013

To the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs,

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into the impacts on health of air quality in Australia

Environment Victoria is one of Australia's leading, independent environment groups. With over 80 member groups and tens of thousands of individual supporters, we've been representing Victorian communities regarding our environment for over 40 years.

Environment Victoria has been campaigning for action on climate change for 15 years. Given that around 90 percent of the state's electricity comes from brown coal, we have focused extensively on Victoria's energy sector throughout this time.

Our work related to the Victorian energy sector has required that we work closely with communities directly impacted by energy production, particularly communities in and surrounding the Latrobe Valley in Gippsland.

As an environmental organisation, we do not have the ability to provide internal health based expertise. However through our work in the Latrobe Valley over several years and ongoing collaboration with health based professionals, we have become deeply concerned about the health impact of the coal industry on communities living near and around the Latrobe Valley.

The impact of coal on human health is well documented in some countries, for example in the United States of America. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said in Australia. Australia's coal industry has to date escaped close scrutiny of the health impacts of the industry's practices. As the properties and quality of coal sources can vary significantly from region to region, we cannot rely solely on the evidence of health impacts from other regions. Similarly, while some recent attention has focused on the health impacts related to coal in NSW and Qld, separate analysis is required in Victoria to understand the full extent of the health complications caused by the local coal industry.

Monitoring of pollution and health impacts locally is unsatisfactory and a cause for concern among the local community in Morwell, as well as further afield in towns such as Traralgon and Sale. Environment Victoria understands that the Victorian EPA only monitors local air pollution in the Latrobe Valley at two locations – a permanent monitoring station at Traralgon, and a single temporary monitoring station at Morwell East[1]. These monitoring stations reportedly monitor levels of a number of pollutants deemed injurious to human health. Such pollutants are limited by state legislation. However, we are concerned that a number of these pollution limits are now out-dated.

[1] ABC News, 28 Feb 2013. *Call for more coal mine air quality testing*, available at http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-02-28/call-for-more-coal-mine-air-quality-testing/4544648

For example, while we understand the Victorian EPA monitors some particulate emissions from coal-fired power stations (although at an inadequate number of monitoring sites) the EPA reportedly does not monitor emissions of ultra-fine particulate matter (PM0.1). Latest scientific evidence suggests that it is this ultra-fine particulate matter that could be of greatest threat to human health for those living near coal-fired power stations.

Elsewhere, the increased understanding of the health risks related to coal power has resulted in increased monitoring and limitations on emissions. For example, in 2011 the US increased regulated limitations on pollutants from coal-fired power stations through the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards – including limitations on emissions of mercury, arsenic and heavy metals[2].

Environment Victoria is calling for a review of safe levels of all pollutants from coal-fired power stations based on best current scientific and medical evidence. Further, we are also calling for an increase in monitoring of all pollutants deemed potentially injurious to human health from coal burning in the Latrobe Valley and surrounding areas.

At the same time, Environment Victoria is calling for a comprehensive assessment of the existing health impacts of air pollution from the coal industry on the communities of the Latrobe Valley and surrounding areas. Anecdotally Environment Victoria understands that high asthma rates exits in local populations, and local families have reported to Environment Victoria that their children only developed asthma after moving to the Latrobe Valley. We have also been contacted on many occasions by Latrobe Valley residents who are concerned about asbestos that was used in the construction of some of the Valley's power stations and the potential for airborne release of asbestos particles as the power stations deteriorate with age.

Recent studies in the US have in some cases linked air pollution from particular coal-fired power stations to the deaths of tens of people every year, and severe health impacts for thousands more[3]. There is no reason to assume that similar threats to human health for communities surrounding the coal industry do not exist in Australia. Environment Victoria therefore urges the Committee to make strong recommendations regarding pathways forward for measurement, assessment, and limitations on toxic and threatening air pollution from coal-fired power stations in the Latrobe Valley.

Finally, while we have confined this submission to a brief assessment of the issues locally impacting the Latrobe Valley, Environment Victoria also urges the Committee to assess the impact of coal on air quality in Anglesea, Victoria as well as the health threat to other communities around Australia directly impacted by the coal industry.

For further information regarding this submission, please contact our Safe Climate Campaign Manager Victoria McKenzie-McHarg

Sincerely,

Mark Wakeham
Campaigns Director
Environment Victoria

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[2] United States Environmental Protection Agency. *Mercury and Air Toxics Standard*, available at http://www.epa.gov/airquality/powerplanttoxics/index.html

[3] Clean Air Task Force 2009, referenced by the Sierra Club, *The Cost of Coal* available at http://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/costofcoal/michigan/default.aspx