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Peat fires expose farming families to poison

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For the past fortnight Will and Lee Scott have milked their cows on a dairy farm overlooking an 80ha swamp of smouldering peat fire emitting poisonous carbon monoxide.

They've left their 11-year-old daughter Taysha and nine-year-old son Luke with relatives, not wanting to risk their health. But to keep their dairy farm functioning they risk their health each day by returning to their cattle.

It's a gruelling routine for a family forced off its property while the vast peat fire burns, more than two weeks after bushfires ripped through southwest Victoria on St Patrick's Day weekend.

"We get up, we milk, we try to visit the kids, do all our farm chores," Ms Scott said yesterday. "By the time we are done milking at night we have to go to Terang and get our carbon monoxide levels tested.

"Then we come home, move the cows, then go to my sisters where the kids have been. Then the day starts again ... We have no choice but to be here."

Peat fires, which continue to burn at Lake Cobrico and Lake Elingamite, near Cobden, and Lake Bullen Merri, near Camperdown, emit poisonous carbon monoxide and particulate matter that is hazardous to human health, particularly to people with existing respiratory conditions.

Residents regularly spending time within a kilometre of the peat fire, and those most at risk such as children and pregnant women, have been advised to wear P2 marks. However, Emergency Management Victoria warns that P2 masks do not provide protection against carbon monoxide; they filter out fine particles from smoke.

At a community meeting yesterday at the Cobden Civic Centre, Emergency Management Commissioner Craig Lapsley told locals that authorities would soon pump water from 4km away to complement current firefighting strategies such as foam tenders, plant machinery and water carriers.

"We are currently looking at a major water source which will be an above-ground series of pipes from about 4km from an underground water supply ... for additional water to the peat fires," he said. But he said these fires would likely burn into May.

"You are likely to have peat fires in this area for a number of weeks," he said. "We will not extinguish them alone without some level of rain."

Incident controller Mark Gunning reminded locals that regular carbon monoxide testing was critical.

He believed authorities had the "right gear and the right technology" to put out the fires before the Warrnambool races in May.

Mr Gunning said they had almost beaten the Lake Bullen Merri fire and were close to containing the Lake Elingamite fire, but the Cobrico peat swamp still contained a lot of heat and was the main smoke hazard for the town.

The Scotts' farm sits on a hill overlooking the Cobrico peat fire.

Ms Scott said she was starting to feel the effect of the gases on her physical health.

"By 4pm in the afternoon my lungs are heavy," she said. "I've never registered (carbon monoxide), but Will has."

Mr Scott's recent tests revealed irregular heart patterns and doctors are trying to determine whether this is related to the poisonous smoke, and have fitted him with a heart monitor. His daughter, Taysha, has also felt unwell at times, developing headaches after she spent Good Friday outdoors collecting money for charity.

"Life's not what we are used to," Ms Scott said yesterday. "The worst thing was realising we may never be able to use the land again ... We sit and wait and hope they're wrong and we can use it again."

PICTURES: DAVID GERAGHTY

Will and Lee Scott with children Luke and Taysha on their farm near Cobrico, where peat fires force locals to don masks

Two weeks after the St Patrick's Day weekend bushfires, a water bomber attacks the peat fire near Cobrico

Masked members of the Country Fire Authority work yesterday in the slow job of extinguishing the peat fires