

Submission
No 3

**INQUIRY INTO CURRENT AND POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF
GOLD, SILVER, LEAD AND ZINC MINING ON HUMAN
HEALTH, LAND, AIR AND WATER QUALITY IN NEW
SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Clarence Environment Centre Inc

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SUBMISSION to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the impacts of gold, lead, silver and zinc mining.

The news that the Greens have secured the above inquiry is most welcome, particularly to small rural community groups such as the Clarence Environment Centre (CEC). We have been actively supporting the Clarence Catchment Alliance's campaign to end mining and minerals exploration in the Clarence River Catchment for the past five years.

The Campaign began in 2017 when the CEC investigated exploratory operations by Castillo Copper which ultimately saw Castillo's licences suspended and the company issued with substantial fines for numerous breaches of those licence conditions.

Currently there are exploration licences held on more than 40 mineral leases in this catchment, and two mining licences. Both are established mines which have been 'moth-balled' for extended periods, and although neither mine is currently operating, owners have indicated their intention to recommence operations shortly.

The above figures reflect the local problem, which is that, while there are, or were, deposits of numerous heavy metals in our mountainous coastal hinterland, those deposits are small and were mostly mined out before the second world war.

There is little or no chance of any bonanza of undiscovered minerals in the valley, and current exploration is focussed on old diggings, with explorers arguing that modern techniques allow those old sites to be re-worked, and even proposing to re-process the tailings from earlier mining activities.

Miners, minerals exploration companies, and geologists have been digging and drilling around the region since the mid-1800s. Small deposits of copper, gold, silver, antimony, and other metals have been found and mined over the years, and all have been closed down or "moth-balled" when the mineral deposits were depleted or no longer viable.

Today, minerals explorers have geological mapping, geophysical surveys, geochemical sampling, and advanced drilling facilities at their disposal. They utilise surface geophysical methods, which incorporate magnetic, gravity, seismic refraction, seismic reflection, electrical resistivity, natural potential, and ground penetrating radar.

They are equipped to undertake mineraloid exploration, plasma exploration, air exploration, water exploration, hydrocarbon exploration, rock exploration, magnetometric surveys, and electromagnetic surveys. And what significant new discoveries have they made to date? **Zip!**

As it is, every time commodity prices rise, leases are acquired, and the glossy prospectuses surface offering shares at \$0.01, or less. These explorers move their drilling rig onto their lease, and issue optimistic reports to the Stock Exchange in the hope of attracting more speculators and see their money double with every cent rise in their share value.

They have no concern for traumatised locals who fear losing their family homes, or the prospect of open-cut or mountain-top removal on their doorstep, terms that are used by those companies when spruiking the yield potential. This normally continues for years, with locals dealing with uncertainty and stress, until finally, either the money runs out or commodity prices fall, and the drilling teams pull up stakes and leave.

Right now, both approved mining licences are existing mines which have been under “care and maintenance” for years, a process that allows these operators to avoid having to rehabilitate the sites.

We investigated the Mount Carrington Mine, near Drake, in 2022, and I attach the reports of our findings, but essentially. This is a mine with a long history of acid mine drainage problems and pollution of local waterways that flow directly into the Clarence River.



The Lady Hampton Pit at the Mt Carrington site is an old silver mine, now filled with water, it's bright blue, see the inset aerial image from SixMaps. It's polluted, no birds or aquatic fauna in sight (see attached report). Yet that water is flowing freely downstream. The green water body is the current gold mine's tailings dam which can also overflow in heavy rain, with an elaborate set-up to pump toxic waste back into the pond.

The Mt Carrington Mine, owned by White Rock Minerals, was until recently in partnership with Thompson Resources Ltd, the company that was actually going to mine the site. In 2022, exploratory drilling took place around the existing mine-workings. However, on 17th May 2023, an ASX announcement informed the public that, “Thomson Resources Ltd (TMZ) have handed operational control of the Mt Carrington site back to the project owner and tenement holder – White Rock Minerals Ltd”. It would seem the drilling had not provided any incentive to proceed with the venture. The mine's immediate future is now uncertain.

The other mine is different and opened up an entirely new set of concerns. This is the Tooloom Creek gold mine which is little more than an up-sized industrial equivalent of the old gold-panning method, known as a wash plant.

The operators source sedimentary material, soil, sand, shale etc from a nearby pit on the banks of Tooloom Creek, a major Clarence River tributary. The soil material is passed through a series of sieves, then water is added, and mixture is 'washed' by paddles, stirring the sludge in a large tank. The heavy gold sinks to the bottom, and the muddy water is pumped out into a tailings dam, where it too settles before being pumped back into the creek,

The site of the current mine has a long and chequered history dating back to the 1870s gold rush when it supported the small goldmining township of "Eight-mile Rush".

It is our understanding that, following the initial granting of that licence, and construction of the wash plant some 33 years ago, the mine operated for about 3 years, and was then placed under "care and maintenance" until 2017.

Since then, the licence holder, Tooloom Creek Pty Ltd, has partnered with three different investors trying and exploit this site. The first reportedly spent \$800,000 revamping the plant and clearing the site; obviously, the 27 years of "care and maintenance" had been far from effective. The reported value of the low-grade gold extracted was just \$30,000, so that partner cut their losses and walked away from the project.

The next investor came in 2020, undertook another wash plant revamp and started processing ore which reportedly returned about \$27,000 worth of gold, costing him $\frac{2}{3}$ more to process the ore than he made from the gold.

Since then, the owner of the land on which the mine stands, has been battling to receive compensation from Tooloom Creek P/L (TCPL), for part of the road maintenance costs incurred, illegal operations outside of the lease that damaged his land, illegal dumping of rocks on his land, and other matters; all to no avail as TCPL simply doesn't respond.

Now, a new partner has arrived and has applied to take up an exploration licence on a very large adjoining lease. However, unlike the standard exploration processes where drilling rigs extract core rock samples from deep underground, which are sent away for analysis, this mine will be excavating the sedimentary material and processing it through the wash plant.



The wash plant today, a rusting relic and eyesore, typical of other sites across the country and now set to reopen to mine material on site, and also process material sourced under a separate exploration licence.

As mentioned above, this proposal has raised concerns and a series of questions which we put to the resources regulator as follows:

Where a licence holder is removing bulk alluvial material for processing, is there a limit,

- a) to the volume of material that can be extracted, and ground disturbance that can occur at each site? Say, where samples are brought from relatively deep underground.*
- b) Is there a limit to the number and size of the 'holes' that can be excavated per hectare? And.*
- c) can the landowner be reimbursed for any losses of income resulting from those activities, i.e., loss of improved pasture or crops, and any other impacts?*
- d) Also, as this type of exploration is far more invasive than merely drilling a hole for core samples, can you confirm that, prior to any such exploration, the licence holder will be required to present some form of environmental impact assessment for all sites where native vegetation is going to be destroyed, and/or water courses may be negatively impacted?*
- e) In your earlier letter, you explained that minerals extracted under an exploration licence cannot be sold. However, we understand that the licence applicant in this instance actually owns a wash plant on an already approved adjoining lease. Will anyone monitor operations to record what gold was obtained from the licenced 'pit' and what came from the various exploration sites?*

We received a prompt response from the regulator with the relevant answers as follows:

- a) Yes, there is a limit to the volume of material that can be extracted, 20,000 tonnes. Extraction of bulk samples greater than 20,000 tonnes of ore requires a development application to be lodged. Also, there is no limit on ground disturbance at a site - however the Exploration guideline: Application and assessment process for exploration activities outlines the different application and assessment requirements for activities that are proposing a greater level of disturbance.*
- b) There is no limit on the number and size of holes at a site - however the Exploration guideline: Application and assessment process for exploration outlines the different application and assessment requirements for activities that are proposing a greater level of disturbance.*
- c) Before undertaking any land-based exploration activities, the authority holder must enter into a written access arrangement with the landholder. That agreement can include specific requirements for disturbances, timeframes for activities to occur and landholder compensation etc. **Note:** this appears to be something the landowner has to negotiate with the mining company, with no guarantees that the miners will agree. As pointed out earlier, this particular landowner has been unable to obtain agreed upon money for road maintenance etc, from previous licence-holders.*
- d) We received no answer to our question as to: “will the licence holder will be required to present some form of environmental impact assessment for all sites where native vegetation is going to be destroyed during exploration, and/or water courses that may be negatively impacted?” As a result, we assume that no environmental impact assessment is required.**

e) In response to our question, *“Will anyone monitor operations to record what gold was obtained from the licenced 'pit' and what came from the various exploration sites?”*, the answer is apparently NO! The response advised us that: *“Annual activity reports provide details of the exploration, environmental management and rehabilitation activities carried out during the previous year of an exploration licence, petroleum exploration licence, assessment lease and petroleum assessment leases (prospecting titles) granted under the Mining Act 1992 (Mining Act) and Petroleum (Onshore) Act 1991 (Petroleum Act) respectively.*

Annual activity reporting requires the submission of two components:

- 1. Annual exploration report, and if applicable geoscientific data (including the amount of minerals extracted during exploration activities), submitted to the Geological Survey of NSW via Titles Management System.*
- 2. Annual environmental management and rehabilitation compliance report, submitted to the NSW Resources Regulator via the Regulator Portal.*

In other words, the regulator, the government, and Australian taxpayers are reliant on reports generated by the licence-holder, informing them about the amount of gold that was sourced under the exploration licence, and the environmental impact of their operations. Hmmmmmmm!

Yours sincerely

John Edwards
For Clarence Environment Centre

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The Clarence Catchment Alliance’s “No Social Licence” declaration

Following the blatant disregard for regulations displayed by another exploration company operating at the historic Cangai Copper Mine site in 2017, and subsequent suspension of all licences in December 2018, we saw the formation of the Clarence Catchment Alliance (CCA), an organisation that called for an end to mining and exploration in the catchment.

That campaign has now been running for over five years and, remarkably, has had virtually no opposition from the community, the single exception being former National Party member for Clarence, Chris Gullaptis. a lone voice until his departure from politics in March this year.

Mr Gullaptis’ successor, Richie Williamson, also a member of the National Party, departed from his Party’s line, and declared his opposition to mining in the Clarence prior to the March election. Later, Mr Williamson made his maiden speech to parliament, stating:

“I believe the Clarence electorate should be mining free. Our natural beauty, our pristine waterways, our prime farmland and national parks should not be put at risk, even if that risk is classified as minor. This is not a Greens’ campaign but one that is community led by local families, farmers, Aboriginal leaders, tourism managers and the general community who do not want to see mining in the upper reaches of the Clarence River. I agree: There is simply too much to lose”.

In reality, if mining was banned from the area, Mr Williamson, the National's, and various industry-funded lobby groups, would probably have little to lose by way of lost opportunities, because the chances of finding any bonanza of undiscovered minerals in the valley are slim.

Miners, minerals exploration companies, and geologists have been digging and drilling around the region since the mid-1800s. Small deposits of copper, gold, silver, antimony, and other metals have been found and mined over the years, and all have been closed down when the mineral deposits were depleted or no longer viable.

Starting with a campaign of community information and awareness, and building alliances through public meetings, all media outlets, including social media, the CCA followed up with a written petition, collecting 13,000 signatures, well over the 10,000 signatures required for it to be debated in Parliament.

The petition, calling for the Clarence Valley to be declared off limits to mining by an amendment under Schedule 1 of the NSW State Environmental Planning Policy (Mining, Petroleum Production and Extractive Industries) 2007, was tabled in State Parliament in mid-2021, by the Member for Lismore, Ms Janelle Saffin, MP, Labor, and was debated on 14th October 2021 <https://youtu.be/FhZ0RqmCXXY>

In the debate Ms Saffin was joined in speaking in support of the petition by the Member for Murray, Ms Helen Dalton, MP, then Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, and Greens member for Ballina, Ms Tamara Smith. This broad, cross-party support for the No Mines Clarence Valley cause, was a feature of this campaign.

Following the tabling of the petition, Clarence Valley Council acknowledged the community's opposition to mining when, at the November 24 CVC meeting, councillors resolved to, ***“seek the support of both state and federal governments, to impose a moratorium on further mining exploration licences and to cancel existing licences”*** <https://clarencevalleynews.com.au/cvc-backs-no-mines-call/>

This call was subsequently supported formally by neighbouring Coffs Harbour City, Bellingen Shire, Kyogle, Glen Innes Severn, and Byron Shire Councils, and included a personal letter of support from the then Mayor of Tweed Shire Council, Cr Chris Cherry.

Publicly announced cross-party support included:

- Ms Catherine Cusack MLC, Liberal
- Mr Chris Minns, then Leader of the NSW opposition, Labor
- Ms Penny Sharpe, then Opposition Environment Spokesperson
- Ms Rose Jackson, then Shadow Minister for Water, Labour
- The Greens, State and Federal

The Clarence Catchment Alliance also received publicly acknowledged support for a ban on mining in the Clarence River catchment from the candidates for Page in the 2022 federal election. They were:

- Kevin Hogan, incumbent Member – National Party. * Patrick Deegan – Labor
- Heather Smith – Australian Federation Party * Kashmir Miller – Greens
- Ian Williamson – United Australia Party * Serge Killingbeck – TNL Party
- Brett Duroux – Indigenous Australia Party * Donna Pike – One Nation
- Thomas Searles – Liberal Democratic Party * Hannabeth Luke – Independent

Publicly acknowledged support was also received from the following candidates for Clarence in the March 2023 state election. They were:

- Greg Clancy – Greens
- Leon Ankersmit – Labour
- Debrah Novak – Independent
- Brett Duroux – Indigenous Australia
- Nicki Levi – Independent
- Richie Williamson - Nationals
- * Mark Rayner – Legalise Cannabis.
- * George Keller – Sustainable Australia

Within the local and broader community, the Clarence Catchment Alliance has gained enthusiastic support from:

- Surfers for Climate
- Surf rider Australia
- Patagonia
- OzFish
- Maclean Lions Environmental
- Revive the Northern Rivers
- * The NSW Nature Conservation Council
- * The North Coast Environment Council
- * The Clarence Environment Centre
- * Valley Watch
- * Clarence Valley Conservation Coalition.

An official survey by Southern Cross University was conducted in association with the March state election, where participants were asked to respond to a number of land-use related questions under the heading: *“To what extent do you support the following in the Clarence region”*. The release of those findings are expected before the end of August, 2023, but our understanding is that an overwhelming number of respondents strongly supported the end “stopping of minerals exploration and mining in the Clarence Valley” question.

The 5-year anti-mining Clarence Valley campaign has been intense, with petition sheets at numerous venues and Alliance members at every market leading to a proliferation of NO MINES gate signs across the Valley region and adjoining LGAs. Together with frequent radio and television interviews and local newspaper support, all publicly available on <https://linktr.ee/Nominesclarencevalley> www.instagram.com/nominesclarencevalley/ www.facebook.com/groups/clarencecatchmentalliance, it would be difficult to believe that anybody could have failed to see and understand the weight of local opposition to mining.

All of the exploration companies that are currently operating in the valley have failed to engage in, or adequately follow-through with community consultation. This indicates that those companies are deliberately ignoring the public’s concern, and the fact that they have no social licence to operate.

Yours sincerely

John Edwards
Honorary Secretary
Clarence Environment Centre Inc
On behalf of the Clarence valley community