

**Submission
No 50**

**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**

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Submission to NSW Upper house inquiry: Current and potential impacts of gold, silver, lead and zinc mining on human health, land, air and water quality in New South Wales

Dear Sir/Madam,

I applaud the NSW Upper House for undertaking this inquiry. The risks to human health from exposure to heavy metals is well established historically. Lead exposure in growing children has been a concern for many years but new risks such as exposure to selenium as a by-product of gold mining are not so well established and thorough scrutiny is required.

Hopefully this Inquiry will also properly consider the equity issues arising from regional mining operations that provide the metals for products mostly used by those outside the mining areas. The health of people living and working in areas near these mines should not be “sacrificed” in the continuing and ever growing demand for these metals.

Any supposed “balancing” of human health and mining needs must prioritise the immediate health needs of residents and workers and their ongoing needs for access to clean water and soils. The needs of current and future generations, which rely/will rely on clean water and healthy agricultural products should also be a priority within the “balancing” included in the Terms of Reference.

The current and potential risks to waterways, soils and drinking water sources must be rigorously scrutinised at all stages of the planning assessment process. Robust independent monitoring of operational compliance of all mines (including those “mothballed”/not in operation) is necessary. The regulatory framework must be comprehensive and strengthened to ensure that the ongoing, residual impact of old mines is captured fully within its scope and consistent with new awareness of risks.

The regulatory framework must be broadened to fully capture the cumulative impacts of past, present and future mining activity. This requires an independent assessment of the actual environmental conditions present when there is a proposed application for new mining activity, both for a new or expanded mining operation.

This “baseline” of environmental conditions must take account of all scenarios associated with a changing climate. It must be sufficiently comprehensive to capture the potential future impacts on the baseline environmental conditions including air and water quality.

I hope that this inquiry will also consider under 1(i) the consequences of increased water access demands that “thirsty” mines create whether operational or otherwise. This is especially critical as we adjust to reduced water availability confirmed in future climate change modelling. Water access demands are not considered properly within the environmental planning and assessment process. Nor are adequate conditions of consent attached to approvals to ensure sustainable use of reduced water access.

For example, the water access needs of the approved McPhillamy’s Gold mine failed to fully consider how water access would be achieved in ways that ensured compliance with NSW and Commonwealth water laws which require sustainable and fair use of water.

It was evident during the assessment phase that the mine's water access needs could not be achieved from purchase of available licences within the regulated Belubula water source. The proponent explored other approaches ie access to the NSW Water Minister's water licences; groundwater sources outside the water resource area of the mine; application for a Specific Purpose Access Licence the details of which are not publicly available.

In planning applications, access to water for mining activity must consider future adequate availability, especially during drought times and with a changing climate, as well as ensuring that the mining activity does not pollute human drinking water and stock watering areas. Mines should not be approved where there is no transparent genuine statement of how their water needs will be met into the longer term and demonstration of full compliance with water laws.

Thank you for an opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely
Cathy Merchant
3 September 2023