

## **INQUIRY INTO BENEFICIAL AND PRODUCTIVE POST- MINING LAND USE**

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## **Post-Mining Land Use (PMLU) Submission re the Hunter Valley 13.6.24**

Thankyou for the opportunity to submit. I am a retired doctor with a lifelong interest and involvement in the effects of environmental degradation on human health. Since retirement I have been active in climate change campaigns, as I have no doubt that climate change is the pre-eminent threat to humans and all other species on the planet. My concerns are as follows:

### 1. Unexpectedly rapid climate change may well hasten coal's decline.

The NSW Government's *Future Jobs and Investment Authorities: Issues Paper* cites an outdated IEA forecast that global coal demand will reduce by 30% by 2050, but recent estimates are that the transition will occur much faster. The IEA's March 2024 forecast is that coal demand will fall by at least 40% and up to 90% during that period. As the impacts of climate change worsen, it is likely that global efforts to phase out coal will intensify. The government must prepare NSW mining communities for the speed of the changes ahead.

### 2. High priority for restoring a degraded environment:

Mine sites must be rehabilitated to strict standards and viable alternative uses including productive ecosystems and agricultural land. This needs a robust regulatory framework – including a guarantee that PMLU reforms must not be made at the cost of reduced environmental outcomes. Rehabilitation and land restoration standards must be maintained or enhanced, with support for restoring biodiversity as a priority. PMLU development projects should be restricted to already-disturbed mining land. The IEA recognises that environmental rehabilitation can help improve quality of life and strengthen social cohesion.

Establish a region-wide biodiversity corridor system that includes rehabilitated mined lands and restored buffer lands. Prioritize the restoration of waterway ecosystems on post-mining land.

Set legal obligations to prevent mine operators from leaving terminal voids that will become perpetual hazards to human and environmental health. Increase coal mining royalties to fund the Hunter's transition and repair the landscape through long-term ecosystem restoration. Increase and enforce penalties for failure to meet progressive rehabilitation commitments. Increase security bonds to cover the true cost of rehabilitating each mine.

### 3. Any mining company cost savings should be reinvested in community and environment projects.

Term of reference (e) asks the Committee to consider how the benefits from PMLU can be shared between the community and 'mine operators'. Benefits for mining companies should not be a policy objective - PMLU reforms should be directed solely at benefiting

the community, including environmental and biodiversity outcomes. Any financial benefits for mine operators arising from PMLU reforms should by regulation be reinvested in projects for the benefit of mining communities and their regional environment. Mining companies have had many years of high profits from a national resource.

4. The Hunter Valley needs an integrated landscape restoration plan, and a dedicated public authority to implement it.

There are 22 coal mines in the Hunter Valley sprawling across hundreds of thousands of hectares of mine-owned land. Most of these mines are due to close in the coming two decades. The landscape-scale impact of mining, and the end of mining in the Hunter call for a landscape-scale restoration plan. This plan should be developed and implemented by an independent, statutorily empowered and well-resourced public authority. This is an essential element of the robust regulatory framework envisaged by term of reference (e). It would also involve creation of an independent centre of excellence in the Upper Hunter - a Hunter Rehabilitation and Restoration Commission to develop a landscape vision for the region, coordinate restoration, and enforce best practice standards for mine rehabilitation and closure.

The scale of the mine rehabilitation and landscape restoration task facing NSW is enormous, but the state has a critical knowledge and skills gap in implementing it. This is an urgent problem that can be turned into a valuable opportunity of the kind envisaged by term of reference (d). The Hunter Valley is ideally placed to become a national and global leader in post-mining landscape restoration, including innovative use of existing infrastructure. This will require reform of existing training institutions like TAFE, and the establishment of new collaborative research institutions such as an independent centre of excellence.

5. Post-mining developments must be driven by meaningful public engagement and deliver lasting benefits for local communities.

The wind-down of the coal industry has profound implications for mining-dominated communities, especially in the Hunter Valley. Local communities have the most at stake in the transition and must be centrally involved in shaping the development of new industries. This will require changes in planning processes, but should also include new models of development that maximise local benefits such as community-ownership and profit-sharing schemes.

There should be public information hubs showing maps and details of current rehabilitation plans and progress, mine closure plans, and post-mine development proposals.

New investment into alternative low emission industries has the potential to provide sustainable opportunities for employment. Key economic opportunities include:

- Energy production – investment into clean and renewable industries

- Agriculture– expanding the capacity of existing agriculture in the region
- Manufacturing – develop manufacturing capacity in high growth industries
- Conservation – land rehabilitation and ecological management to restore and foster the natural Hunter ecosystem

New developments must be compatible with a decarbonised economy –priority to be given to renewable energy projects, which create the best returns and growth in employment. Eg solar panel farms, battery farms and green hydrogen projects.

6. The NSW Government should facilitate the return of some mine-owned lands to First Nations people.

Access to country is fundamental to First Nations people’s self-determination and ongoing practice of culture. The closure of large mines offers a unique opportunity to return portions of unmined buffer lands to First Nations groups and deliver to them real and continuing benefits. This would help ensure the benefits of mine closure were shared as prefigured in term of reference (e). The government should facilitate this process in collaboration with First Nations groups. They should be high on the list for employment as workers and advisors , especially in ecosystem restoration.

7. References:

- (i) “After the coal rush, the clean up.” A community blueprint to restore the Hunter (A report from Hunter Renewal, Jan 2023)
- (ii) “Diversification and growth. Transforming mining land in the Hunter Valley.” (A report by Ernst and Young for Lock the Gate Alliance 26 May 2022)