

INQUIRY INTO BENEFICIAL AND PRODUCTIVE POST- MINING LAND USE

Organisation: Wollar Progress Association

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WOLLAR PROGRESS ASSOCIATION

Standing Committee on State Development
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Macquarie St Sydney NSW 2000

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Submission
Inquiry into Beneficial and productive post-mining land use

Introduction

Wollar Progress Association represents the small community of Wollar in the Mid-Western Region Local Government Area. The district is within the Hunter River catchment area in the Upper Goulburn River tributary catchment.

Coal mining has been operating in this delicate sandstone landscape since the mid 1980's with a massive expansion occurring in the early 2000's that is ongoing. The three largest coal producing mines in NSW in 2023 occur in the area including the Glencore Ulan Coal Mine, the adjacent Yancoal Moolarben Coal Mine and closest to Wollar village is the Peabody Energy Wilpinjong Coal Mine.

The Wollar community has been significantly impacted by the poor policy and planning decisions undertaken by the NSW Government relating to coal mining impacts. The Peabody Energy Wilpinjong Coal Mine is a large open cut mine operating since 2006, with numerous expansions and modifications, that have led to extreme environmental impacts and the decimation of the local population.

The three mines are adjacent to and abut the Goulburn River National Park and Munghorn Gap Nature Reserve with significant cumulative impacts on critically endangered ecosystems and species and on important Aboriginal cultural heritage values.

All three coal mines are in the process of applying for ongoing expansion approval. While this Inquiry is focussed on areas where the coal industry is possibly exiting, we wish to raise the issues of current impacts that should not be approved to continue into the future.

There has been significant impact on the integrity of the Goulburn River and its surrounding sensitive landscape that cannot be remediated into the future and severely restricts opportunities for beneficial and post-mining land use.

Key threats from Mudgee Region coal mines:

1. Water impacts

Good quality water has been drained from the landscape with this impact predicted to continue over hundreds of years. Base flows to the Goulburn River are being intercepted and will not be returned when mining finishes.

This is particularly concerning for predictions of more prolonged droughts caused by climate change. Many people left in the Wollar district have properties fronting the Goulburn River and are concerned about loss of basic rights flows due to these longterm impacts.

The Goulburn River is currently impacted by discharges of treated mine water, with salinity levels higher than the original background level. These discharges occur at a time that is convenient for the mining operations and have completely destroyed the natural flow variability of the river system.

During times of flood, the Environmental Protection Licences (EPLs) that regulate mine water discharges have been turned off to provide exemptions to the water quality regulations. Untreated mine water has been allowed to be discharged into the Goulburn River for up to six months after flood periods, polluting the river with salt and heavy metals.

Sometimes, the majority of the river flow is from mine discharge water.

There should be no approval of further disturbance of the Goulburn River catchment area.

2. Biodiversity impacts

The large open cut operations at the Moolarben and Wilpinjong Mines have caused the removal of large areas of critically endangered ecological communities.

The recent approval of the Wilpinjong Extension Project in 2017 has caused a condition of approval that most of the mine rehabilitation be returned to Regent Honeyeater habitat as an offset for cumulative loss of breeding and feeding sites.

Under these conditions there can be no other form of productive post-mining land use.

Biodiversity offset areas are not protected in perpetuity, as demonstrated by the proposed impacts of the EnergyCo transmission line for the Central West Orana Renewable Energy Zone requiring to clear easements within existing biodiversity offset areas on both Wilpinjong and Moolarben owned land.

It is essential that no further loss to critical areas of biodiversity values be approved for any more mine expansion in the district.

3. Cultural heritage impacts

The Goulburn River was an important trading route from coastal areas into inland Australia. There is significant evidence of occupation and use of this landscape for traditional hunting, food gathering, shelter and ceremony.

Post- mine land should be returned to First Nations to allow for self-determination and ongoing practice of culture. There are a significant number of native title and land claims in this area that need to be acknowledged.

4. Social impacts

The functional rural community and enterprises once existing between the villages of Ulan, Wollar and Bylong has virtually been wiped out through ongoing land acquisition relating to coal mine expansion in the region.

Peabody Energy is currently demolishing houses in Wollar village with NSW Government approval during a major housing crisis. The extent of cumulative social impact of the mining industry has not been adequately assessed or acknowledged as a key issue in progressing towards a post-mining future.

Social fabric of remote rural communities is essential and must be maintained. These communities can be rebuilt if protected from further mine expansion.

5. Climate Change

Ongoing extreme weather events will cause increasing problems for stable mine rehabilitation outcomes. There should be no more land disturbance anywhere in NSW for continued production of coal that will fuel more potent climate change impacts.

Impacts of extreme heat, floods, drought and storms are already affecting the productivity of the mining industry, as well as agriculture and food and water security into the future.

The rail line to the Port of Newcastle had major buckling during last summer extreme heat events that caused train derailment and bushfire and ongoing track work over the past six months. This has caused coal stockpiles at the mines to increase and is affecting production rates.

Likewise major flooding events and more severe storms with increased lightning activity have caused impacts on mine operations.

There is no economic, social or environmental justification for the NSW Government to continue approving coal mine expansion.

For more information about this submission contact Wollar Progress Association: