

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

Name: Ms Amanda Wetzel

Date Received: 25 June 2024

24 June 2024

ATTN: Hon Emily Suvaal, Chair
Members of the Standing Committee on State Development
Beneficial and productive post-mining land use
NSW Legislative Council

Dear Ms Suvaal and Members of the Committee,

I am writing in response to the call for submissions in relation to the Parliamentary inquiry into beneficial and productive post-mining land use. I welcome the Government's attention and examination of this important matter.

I am a qualified Urban and Regional Planner with over 20 years' experience, specialising in strategic land use planning. I have been based in Newcastle since 2014, during which time I have held the roles of Regional Growth Planning Manager for the (then) NSW Department of Planning, Infrastructure and Environment, Regional Director for GYDE Planning, and, currently, the Research Programs Director for the Institute for Regional Futures at the University of Newcastle.

I am currently on extended leave and was only recently made aware of this Parliamentary Inquiry, so have had to prepare this submission quickly. Nevertheless, I hope it will direct you to some important work undertaken by teams I have been involved with or come across through the course of my work.

I strongly recommend you request a briefing about a **key project initiated by CSIRO and delivered in partnership with University of Queensland's Sustainable Minerals Institute and University of Newcastle's Institute for Regional Futures**. This project considered whether there was an appetite for establishing a comprehensive vision for post-mining in the Hunter and, if so, what that vision would involve. The project methodology involved:

- desktop research into a range of topics, including the extent of mining's influence over the region's economy, communities, and landscape,
- collating spatial data pertaining to a range of environmental, infrastructure, and land use considerations, and
- engaging with key stakeholders across the government, industry, and community sectors.

I was part of this project team from September 2022 until November 2023, and, at the time of my departure, it was still ongoing. I am unsure whether the findings have been finalised and published but would be happy to connect you with the project team and/or assist with providing an overview of key issues emerging from those research efforts.

The remainder of the issues described in my submission should not be considered findings from that research, though may certainly overlap. Rather, I have identified the following issues and insights through my various roles.

Transforming the Hunter's mining footprint should be considered a matter of national significance and resourced accordingly.

Mining has been a key foundation in the Hunter's economy for generations. It is entangled in every aspect of the region's economy, communities, and natural landscapes. From what I understand, the scale and proximity of mining operations here – both historical and ongoing – are unique to other mining regions in Australia.

In 1999, the NSW Government prepared a Synoptic Plan (I can provide a copy on request) that attempted to create a unified vision for post-mining land use in what is now the Upper Hunter mining region. To my knowledge, this plan has never been fully implemented and the scale it envisaged has been far surpassed.

The Synoptic Plan was responding to the need to plan for additional complexities in terms of cross-site issues such as (but not limited to) biodiversity, transport (road and rail) access, and 'sensitive receivers' for emissions, etc. These issues not only rely on coordination across a large expanse of land, but also over decades and across multiple ownership arrangements (including for the same site). These issues are not experienced to the same extent in other mining regions that may have single, though large, mine sites or more dispersed mining footprints. They require a stronger level of leadership and continuity and, in my view, are outside the remit, capabilities and resourcing of Local Governments to implement.

Key areas for solutions-focused efforts – using the Hunter as a test bed for policy and process innovation

There have not been many recent examples of sites being fully relinquished and redeveloped in NSW, so the process is somewhat ambiguous. This makes it difficult to understand what is a legitimate grievance with the various processes versus what is a perceived risk or in-practice challenge.

With the above in mind, the Hunter can provide a good 'test bed' for solutions-focused efforts, driving policy and process innovation that would benefit other locations. Based on my experience, I would recommend starting with initiatives to specifically address the following matters.

Availability of Final Land Use Plans. I understand recent changes to the Mining Act now requires all mining operators to prepare closure plans to a specific template. This includes preparing a single map of the site showing the final land use configuration. As a practitioner, this is a welcome change in practice, and I note that this has been the standard practice in QLD for some time. However, there is currently no single source for practitioners or investors to access all of these plans; instead, they must be sourced individually via mining operators' websites. Given the scale and proximity of operations

in the Hunter, I would recommend the Government lead on assembling the spatial data underpinning all closure plans available and making that publicly available to avoid repetition and/or inaccuracies in public understanding of this important issue.

Approval pathways. To fully relinquish a site and make it available for redevelopment, approvals must be obtained under both the Mining Act (relinquishment) and Planning Act (rezoning and/or site development). The extent to which these approval processes overlap is currently unclear / largely untested. From what I understand about the site approvals relevant to the former Rhondda colliery and future BlackRock Motor Park Resort in the Lake Macquarie LGA, there are several opportunities for improvement where approvals are occurring in parallel under these Acts that would help to avoid costly time delays and repetition in elements like application documentation and site studies.

Transfer of ownership. I understand it is the mining regulator's duty to ensure sites are safe as part of the relinquishment process. However, it is impractical to expect no residual risks remain as ownership is transferred to enable a new use. And, in some cases, the rehabilitation and 'make safe' efforts involve works that will ultimately be reversed as the site is redeveloped (e.g., vegetation cleared, roads re-built, or boreholes re-opened). More effort is required to understand where savings could be made in this aspect of the site adaptation. And further guidance should be prepared as to how site encumbrances are transferred when ownership changes (e.g., registered on title versus development approval conditions, etc.).

Mapping legacy sites. There are several historical / abandoned mine sites scattered around the Hunter region, particularly in Lake Macquarie, Newcastle and Maitland LGAs, that are not fully documented. These sites are close to or immediately adjoin existing urban areas and would be advantageous additions to the urban footprint in Australia's seventh largest city. Local Governments alone cannot lead this initiative, and, in my view, the State or Federal Governments should provide assistance to firstly locate these sites, and subsequently formulate strategies to bring them back into purposeful use where appropriate.

'Place Planning' or equivalent. The Hunter Regional Plan sets out directions for a Place Planning approach to adapt key mining areas in the Upper Hunter and Lake Macquarie LGAs. The Place Planning process is also new and largely untested, so it is currently difficult to know whether this will be an effective method to ensuring a more comprehensive approach – similar to that adopted by the 1999 Synoptic Plan. It is also uncertain whether this process will continue beyond the 5-year lifespan of the Regional Plan and/or a change in Government, whichever comes first. I would recommend some consideration of an independent / non-governmental approach to landscape scale (i.e., multi-site / multi-decade) planning for these areas, with a view to minimising the level of repetitive efforts

Closing remarks

Thank you for taking the time to consider my submission, and for your efforts looking into this matter. I am genuinely optimistic that tangible benefits can be derived from the adaptation of historical and current mine-sites, but only if key areas of improvement are addressed with the processes and practices guiding site transitions.

I also feel there are important learnings in post-mining land use considerations that would be transferrable to the emerging 'new energy' market. Mine sites may have a lifespan of up to 100 years, so the benefits realised at the end of those projects would legitimately not been foreseeable at their conception. The new projects emerging to deliver a more renewables-focused energy market may suffer the same fate if we don't forward-apply lessons emerging here.

I would be happy to be contacted to provide any additional information, documentation or contact details for specific projects as relevant.

Kind regards,

Amanda Wetzel