

**PAC submission: Shenhua 29 June 2014**

**Acknowledgement of Country:**

**Background:**

Many people have the view that the aspect of their life which they most value, is good health. Many of us value clean air, and water and healthy soils. We value the benefits of what many people refer to as a clean green environment. Sustainable agricultural production is a goal and a way of life for farmers in the north west of NSW. This is the case for my own family and our farming enterprise.

Community members in the Namoi catchment feel so strongly about this issue, that a steering committee was formed in 2012, to advocate for a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) for the Gunnedah Basin. This follows on from the adverse health outcomes reported in the Hunter Valley. Many meetings were convened with representatives from our Local Health District, tertiary institutions, Doctors for the Environment and govt. It would seem there is consensus on the issue...a HIA is needed.

To date, with no funding, despite representation to Government at both levels in 2012-13, the HIA has not commenced.

Regardless, the steering committee is of the view that further projects exploiting resources and fossil fuels must not proceed without a health impact assessment.

The need for a Gunnedah Basin Health Impact Assessment is based on the following:

1. Current NSW Government Planning processes are based on incremental project approvals. These approval processes do not account for cumulative impacts of developments. There is major concern in the community regarding increased health issues concerning the interrelated systems of human, social and environment, including water, soil, flora and fauna.

While coal and coal seam gas companies talk of achieving a "Social License to Operate" in the communities in which they work, community members remain concerned about a range of health related issues including increased medical disorders, emotional stress, social dislocation, loss of water quality (for example Brereton et al, 2008). A Health Impact Assessment is one of the means by which companies may move closer to gaining this Social License to Operate.

2. Communities are concerned that the NSW Government does not consider the true costs and benefits of developments. While they value, in economic terms, the prospective royalty income from coal and coal seam gas companies, environmental and social impacts receive less attention. The costs of health impacts on populations do not appear to be considered either in the development approval processes or in health service planning.
3. The NSW's Department of Planning report *Impacts of Underground Coal Mining on Natural Features in the Southern Coalfield Strategic Review* (2008) recommends the application of Precautionary Principle, which "requires risks

associated with other options and socio-economic facts to be taken into account” (p107). To date, there appears to be little application by governments of the precautionary principle, regarding a range of impacts, including health. The Health Impact Assessment will work towards re-dressing this.

4. There are serious health and social harms associated with coal mining and coal fired power stations for people living in surrounding communities identified in international literature, (Colagiuri et al 2012, p.iii), for example higher risks of cardiopulmonary disease, chronic lung disease, hypertension and kidney disease (Hendryx & Ahern, 2008, cited by Deloitte Access Economics, 2012)

Despite anecdotal evidence of high levels of community concern about increased health risks, there have currently been no formal epidemiological studies conducted anywhere in Australia, on the health impacts of mining (Deloitte Access Economics, 2012 p41). The significant costs and policy implications of this harm has not been recognized by Australian Governments to date. The Health Impact Assessment will assist in identifying costs, enable policy changes, and inform planning decisions.

5. The Gunnedah Basin community is committed to pursuing a triple bottom line (TBL) assessment of impacts *prior* to developments being approved. These TBL studies must transparently and objectively identify and value the true long-term cumulative economic, environmental and social benefits and costs of coal and CSG extraction, as compared with current land uses and potential alternative business development. Health is a major component of the social aspects of TBL decision making, with interrelated impacts on the economic aspects due to costs. The Health Impact Assessment will identify these impacts and improve decision-making.

These substantial risks equate to significant human costs, as well as significant financial costs to governments. The Health Impact Assessment will assist in identifying and valuing potential health issues related to coal seam gas extraction.

In addition, coal trains from the Gunnedah basin, which are increasing in length and frequency, travel through populated areas from Gunnedah to Newcastle...without any cover on the loads.

A research project across 5 catchments in NSW, QLD and SA, which was presented at the sustaining rural communities conference in Narrabri, revealed that more than 50% of people value health services as the highest priority in their choice of where to live. This was well above employment and education. A surprise to me at the time...but demonstrates the value we put on our health.

The Australian Government Department of Health have developed Health Impact Assessment Guidelines “to promote and enhance the incorporation of HIA into environmental and planning impact assessment, thereby improving the consideration of health issues.”

Total Federal Health budget- Total expenses were \$382.6 billion in 2012-13  
NSW budget released last week: a record 19.9 billion, a massive one third of the  
budget.

We now see more pressure put on local government to assist with the provision of  
health services to attract and retain GPs.

The message is clear...ill health is a burden on us all.  
We need to work towards maintaining good health.

A report by Dr Lorraine Sheppard in the Journal of Allied Health Sciences and  
Practice, identifies that "the present health system tends to operate as an illness  
system with a focus on ill health rather than being healthy."

Are we to remain reactive...trying to deal with the consequences of decisions even to  
the detriment of the health of our communities? Could there be a better way? Could  
we be considering cumulative health impacts of resource developments? Could we be  
putting a greater emphasis on ESD principles, intergenerational equity and the  
precautionary principle? Can we say NO to development proposals which  
compromise the health of the community?

What assurance do we have that coal developments will not impact on human health?  
The evidence from previous and existing developments would indicate adverse health  
impacts for residents living near coal mines.  
Lung disease, heart disease, increased morbidity and mortality.

With regard to the PAC's considerations today:

This project represents real threat to the health outcomes of the community in the Namoi  
catchment and threats to the environment. Members of the HIA steering committee are  
concerned about these projects and recommend that they not proceed without a HIA on the  
communities affected by the proposed development.

