

IPC Public Hearing 26/2/19 Speaker: Alexandra Springett

Prior to the Battle for Berrima Community Meeting last October I spent several days reading corporate documents, including the Hume Coal Project Preliminary Environmental Assessment produced in 2015.

It's a well written volume, not as riveting as *Gone with the Wind* but thank heavens not quite as long. What I did note throughout were disclaiming phrases in regard to potential negative impacts of the mine.

The rhetoric went, and I quote – 'as much as possible...when possible...as little as possible...when possible...if possible'.

What Hume Coal seemed to be advising the reader was that though the aim would be for best practise measures, best outcomes could not be guaranteed.

Which of course it can't, because the mining method proposed – pine feathering - has never been trialled in Australia. It has been used in some Chinese mines but I, and others, are unable to find relevant data re outcomes.

Therefore perhaps anything Hume Coal purports in regard to water depletion and contamination, air pollution, and land subsidence, should be regarded as not being evidence based, and be understood as being supposition.

So can we afford to engage with a method of mining that has no empirical data for safety and low impact statistics?

Not that we in the Southern Highlands want another coal mine of any denomination, but the supposed positives of the pine feather method forms the basis of Hume Coal's argument, and given the lack of statistics shouldn't we therefore consider it with cautious scrutiny?

Our community is largely aware of the probable negative outcomes upon water content and quality from this proposed mine. What we should also consider is the issue of land subsidence.

Now, the pine feather method is theoretically designed to minimise the risk of land subsidence after coal extraction. In fact the Hume Coal Project document previously listed states 'surface and subsurface impacts will be negligible'.

What is 'negligible' I ask you? Where is the evidence based data to support this claim? Hume Coal's admission to a possible 20mm subsidence – 'negligible' – is theory at its most hopeful.

The proposed mine area is almost 50 square kilometres, and transected by approximately nine kilometres of the national Hume Highway. A diagram indicating

this is taken from a recent Hume Coal document and shows the proposed mined areas abutting the highway to each side and the two underground tunnel roads connecting the two sides of the mine separated by the highway.

It's not unreasonable to surmise then that if subsidence were to occur along the length, or under, the highway, due perhaps to fracture of the surface strata above the mine voids, or collapse of the retaining coal pillars, or in worst case scenario, an explosion occurs within the voids due to chemical reactions within the toxic fill, then substantial damage could occur to the highway that passes through and over this.

As you well know, the Hume Highway is a vital piece of national infrastructure connecting the capitals of Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne as well as the smaller cities and towns along its route. It is hugely subscribed to by major haulage which ensures connectivity of produce and equipment between these major areas, and it's the main route for many thousands of people travelling between business and home.

If this highway were to be compromised by land subsidence, can you imagine the overwhelming havoc that would cause to this Canberra/Sydney/Melbourne corridor? The devastating loss to national, corporate, small business, and private income? A loss that could be counted in multi billions of dollars?

It should be a tenet of good government that risk assessment becomes part of any approval process.

Indeed, can this government allow the risk of crippling damage to the Hume Highway?

Can it risk the dire consequences, the enormous loss to the public amenity – and the cost to the government purse – should approval be given to this mine, its methodology and consequences as yet untested?

section, geological washouts and structures as well as heritage properties (adjacent to Golden Vale Road), a dam notification zone and some surface infrastructure.

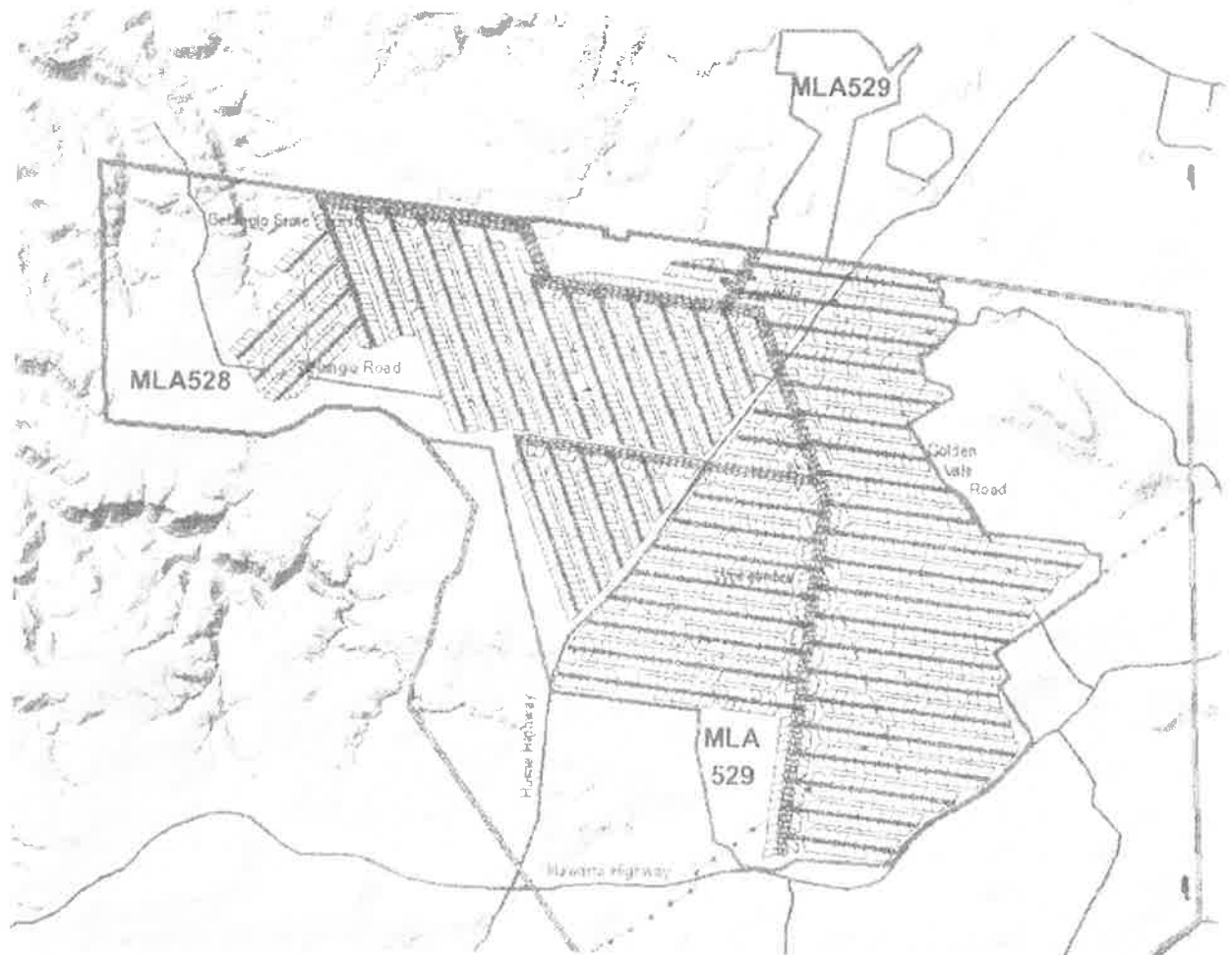


Figure 4: Hume Coal's proposed mine plan, showing the mining lease application areas in green outline. Note MLA527 and MLA528 – underground and MLA529 surface facilities.

CONCLUSION

The Hume Coal Project is on track for public exhibition of its EIS early in 2017. Mine plan design has been influenced by the geological model and the interpreted geological structures as well as other constraints. Coal resources are sufficient to justify an underground operation centred around development and maintaining ground stability through pillar design. This stability will allow protection of the overlying groundwater system and critical surface infrastructure.

A significant portion of the Narrabeen and the Illawarra Coal Measures are not present within the Authorisation 349 area. It is uncertain, if the Narrabeen strata was deposited in the first instance or if the material was eroded by the Hawkesbury Sandstone.

The Wongawilli Seam is of sufficient quality to produce a good coking coal as well as a middlings thermal product. The mine's position is a significant advantage in respect to infrastructure with both major road access and the use of existing rail for coal transport to Port Kembla's coal loader.

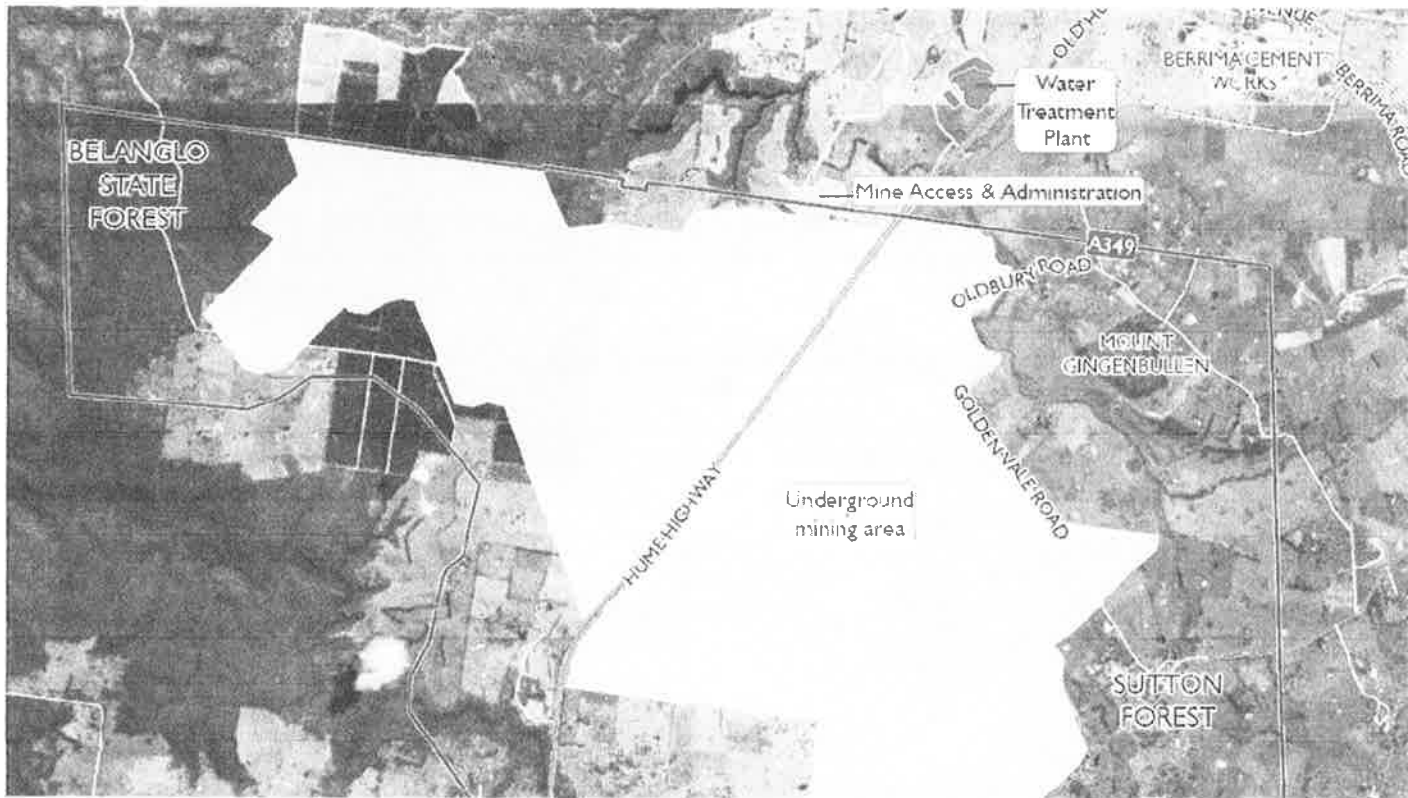
Adverse community groups are opposed to the project, but the commitment that Hume Coal has to the consultation process is seeing changing attitudes in the region. A strong community consultation program by the company has seen local support for the development and jobs improve significantly.

Department of Planning and Environment recommends Hume Coal Project not be approved

- Lauren Strode and Olivia Ralph

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Following an assessment of the Hume Coal Project, the Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) has recommended it not be approved.

DPE has completed its comprehensive assessment of the Hume Coal Project and associated Berrima Rail Project and the Minister for Planning has referred the projects to the Independent Planning Commission (IPC) for a public hearing.

The department has undertaken a rigorous examination of the proposals, which included seeking independent expert advice on a range of issues, including groundwater, mine design, economics and noise.

At this stage, based on the information available, the department does not consider that the economic benefits of the projects outweigh the likely adverse impacts on the community and environment.

Therefore, the department has found the projects are not in the public interest and should not be approved.

Hume Coal spokesman Ben Fitzsimmons said they were disappointed with the recommendation after the years of “scientific and technical research” which had gone into the project.

“Hume Coal has put forward the lowest impact underground mining plan seen in NSW ever,” he said.

“The impact is less than that of other mines in the state.”

Mr Fitzsimmons said the department had “pandered to the squeaky wheel”.