

Submission on the proposed amendment to prohibit open cut mining at Drayton South

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Healthy planet, **healthy people.**

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Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) is an independent, self-funded, non-government organisation of medical doctors and students in all Australian States and Territories. Our members work across all specialties in community, hospital and private practices. We work to prevent and address the diseases - local, national and global - caused by damage to our natural environment. We are a public health voice in the sphere of environmental health with a primary focus on the health harms from pollution and climate change.

Summary of Position

- DEA supports the prohibition of open cut mining in the mapped area of the Upper Hunter near Jerrys Plains. However DEA is of the view that the amendment does not go far enough, and that all coal mining on the site should be prohibited. This is because any form of coal mining on this site would have damaging effects on local population health, the environment and existing industry. Furthermore, coal mining on this site would have negative global effects, from the contribution to greenhouse gas emissions and the subsequent effects of climate change, including threats to health. Therefore DEA advocates for the Mining SEPP amendment to be widened, to include a ban on all coal mining on the site.
- DEA supports the SRD SEPP amendment, to prevent lodgement of a State significant development application for development that is prohibited under the Mining SEPP. Mining and extractive industry activities prohibited under Schedule 1 of the Mining SEPP should not be allowed to have State significant development applications made, as this would undermine the ability of the Mining SEPP to operate as intended.

Background

DEA notes that Drayton South is the subject of recommendations by the Independent Planning Assessment Commission and that the Commission has twice refused mining applications on the Drayton South exploration licence area (in 2013 and 2017) and determined that open cut mining is incompatible with the unique combination of existing land uses in the area. DEA has reviewed the Commission's reports as background to the preparation of this submission.

DEA also notes that since the most recent rejection of the mining application on the Drayton South exploration licence area, the site has been sold to Malabar Coal, who intend to develop underground mining on the site.

Reasons for Supporting a Widening of the Mining SEPP Amendment to Include the Prohibition of all Mining at Drayton South

Local Effects

Dust and Threats to Air Quality

Coal mining is associated with chronic health problems among miners, such as black lung disease. Furthermore, communities near coalmines may be adversely affected by blasting and dust, and transportation of coal via trains and trucks also releases coal dust.²

These air pollutants contribute to some of the leading causes of death in our society including heart disease, respiratory disease and lung cancer.³ Furthermore, coal pollutants can affect lung development in children and trigger asthma attacks.⁴

Short term exposures to particulate matter can also trigger cardiovascular events including heart attacks and illness^{5,6} while longer-term exposure (even at the low levels that may be within the current national guidelines) can increase the risk for cardiovascular mortality and reduced life expectancy.³ Therefore, the development of any additional coalmines in the Upper Hunter region would confer unacceptable additional risks to the health of local residents.

Water Quality

Coalmining poses a significant threat to the integrity of aquifers, which may be hydrologically connected to other groundwater-dependent ecosystems including dams on farm and horse-breeding properties, bores and rivers. Water from coalmines must be disposed of and waste material is often held within the surface lease of a mine, introducing a risk of contamination of human food sources during life of a mine and after.⁷

Previously, the Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development (the IESC) has advised that mine development at the site has the potential to contribute to regional, mining-related and cumulative impacts to water resources within the Hunter Valley.⁸ Mining would create a potential risk to water quality in Saddlers Creek from uncontrolled spills and releases from sediment dams, and contaminants including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) may present a risk to water resources from runoff from the site.

Social Impacts and Subsequent Health Effects

Coalmining can change the lifestyle and character of a community.⁹ Doctors in coalmining areas have reported that increases in asthma, stress and mental ill health have become more common. As more coalmines are opened, as has already occurred in parts of the Hunter Valley in New South Wales, the social fabric of a region changes, the role and function of an areas alters, and many inhabitants of these regions have developed depression, anxiety and ill health.¹⁰ This is a particular risk in the Drayton South area, as the surrounding area is particularly important to the thoroughbred and viticulture industries. To provide certainty and reassurance to the local community, the Mining SEPP amendment should be widened, to include a ban on all coal mining on the site.

Global Effects

Emissions

It is estimated that 80% of the world's known fossil fuel reserves must be left in the ground if warming is to be limited to 2°C.¹¹ For Australia to play its part in tackling climate change, over 90% of coal reserves must remain unburnt and no new mines developed.^{11,12} Any form of coal mining at Drayton South may seem like a relatively minor contribution at a global level, yet the cumulative impact of ongoing coal mining here and elsewhere will inevitably contribute to devastating climate change, which will worsen health for people worldwide - who are already dying at a rate of 200 000 premature deaths per year from coal combustion.¹³ It is fundamentally flawed to ignore this potential global health impact in local-level decision making.

Effect of Climate Change on Health

The World Health Organization states that climate change is the greatest emerging threat to public health and to the environment. Coal-fired power stations are potent emitters of greenhouse gases and are important contributors to climate change. Climate change will profoundly affect some of the most fundamental prerequisites for good health, including clean air and water, sufficient food, adequate shelter and freedom from disease.¹⁴ These health impacts are beginning to be felt in Australia. The elderly, the very young and those with existing heart and respiratory disease are vulnerable to the increase in heat waves due to climate change. Drought has affected farming communities who have suffered from stress, social disruption and poor mental health. More extreme weather events can be expected with threats to food and water security; rising sea levels; changes in vector-, food- and water-borne diseases; exacerbation of air pollution; increases in aeroallergens and impacts on mental health.¹⁵

Economic Effects

Costs to Health

DEA believes that the economic cost of the health impacts of coal mining must be included in any economic evaluation of a new coal mine. Coal combustion as an energy source is an expensive option when the industry's burden on public health and the environment are considered. In Australia, when the health costs of only air pollution from coal combustion on the community are considered, there is an estimated cost to healthcare of \$2.6 billion per annum.¹⁶

Further, a US study analysed the health and environmental costs of coal in the US and concluded that the damage caused by coal should double or triple the costs of coal-generated electricity.¹⁷

There are economic uses to the land this area (for example, thoroughbred breeding, viticulture, and tourism) that do not confer the same threats to human health, have such negative environmental effects and that are sustainable in the long term. Allowing the Drayton South area to be opened up to any form of coal mining would mean prioritising short-term economic gain over the long-term economic costs to public health and local industry.

Conclusion

DEA believes that the health of the population should be of the highest importance when considered land-use options. Any form of coal mining on the mapped area of the Upper Hunter near Jerrys Plains would be detrimental to human health. The health effects would be felt locally, from the direct impacts of any potential coalmine, and nationally and globally, through the contribution of coal mining at the site to greenhouse gas emissions and the subsequent negative health effects of climate change. Furthermore, allowing any form of coal mining on the site would be to the detriment of other local industry and land uses, which do not confer the same risks to health. Therefore while DEA supports the prohibition of open cut mining in area, we are of the view that the amendment does not go far enough, and that the Mining SEPP amendment must be widened, to include a ban on all coal mining on the site.

Further Information

Further information on the health impacts of coal can be found in DEA's fact sheet "Coal's toll on health" (2017). Available online at <https://www.dea.org.au/the-health-toll-of-coal-fact-sheet/>

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