

Stream of conscience

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IT was always going to come to this.

Sooner or later, somebody was going to want to strip-**mine** the **Hunter's** alluvial floodplains for the coal that lies beneath.

Now that most of the other "easy" coal has been taken, it is natural that these areas - previously considered by most to be off-limits - should be proposed as the **Hunter** Valley's last sacrifice to the great coal god.

Better minds than **mine** have been saying for years that this land is too risky to take chances with.

Experts will tell you that there is much more to rivers than meets the eye. The flowing stream you see on the surface is often just the obvious bit.

Below the river bed and saturating the "alluvium" around the visible channel is where much of the real action is happening.

Send draglines and explosive operators into this alluvium and you can get what many **miners** have already got: good-quality river water seeping, flowing or pouring into their pits or workings.

Though the visible river isn't touched, that water is being lost from the stream.

It's water the **miners** don't want but once they've broken the alluvium it takes more than a finger in the dyke to fix it. In fact, many reputable experts say it can't be fixed.

Hunter people have watched mining companies strive for years with limited success to undo careless damage to streams.

So what if next time some terrible accident happens to a **Hunter** waterway it's not to a smallish stream but to a critically important waterway like Glennies Creek or the **Hunter** River itself? Will the coal company and the government that approved the **mine** compensate everybody affected if a catastrophe occurs?

It is easy to see why we have come to this dangerous crossroads.

The price of coal is high and mining companies want to wring every last tonne and every last dollar from their leases.

These short-term tenants of the land have a vested interest in arguing they can safely extract this sub-alluvial coal. Their claims should be treated with extreme care, since the consequences of their failure for us permanent residents and our environment are potentially huge.

People who understand these issues better than I do assure me that evidence is mounting that groundwater in some parts of the **Hunter** is nearing depletion and river flows are being measurably affected - even without the major alluvial ruptures being proposed.

Some say it could take 350 years for the system to recover from its present point if all mining stopped tomorrow.

I have read the government's 2005 draft guidelines for the management of stream and aquifer systems in coalmining developments. These guidelines take a sane, considered view of risks and

benefits and recognise that without its rivers the **Hunter** may have no viable future when the **miners** pack their bags and leave.

It's time for the government to read its own guidelines and - better yet - enshrine them into law before it's too late.

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