

Residents fear mining behind mystery of the vanishing lakes

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AS THE drought breaks across the state, an ancient waterway system on Sydney's fringes is slowly drying up.

For at least a year, water levels in the historic Thirlmere Lakes, near Picton in the city's south-west, have been dramatically dropping despite above average rainfall in the region over the past six months.

The five freshwater lakes that make up the waterway system are about 15 million years old and were once drawcards for speedboat racers and water skiers until mud slowly began replacing the water.

Caroline Graham, vice-president of the environmental group Rivers SOS, said there were increasing concerns that aquifers had been fractured by nearby longwall mining. "The possibility that mining has done some damage should be investigated," Ms Graham said.

The opposition's environment spokeswoman, Catherine Cusack, agrees and this week moved a motion in Parliament calling on the state government to hold an inquiry into the disappearance of the water.

"The mysterious disappearance of water from the Thirlmere Lakes system must be urgently investigated, including a scientific review to determine whether the lakes have been affected by longwall mining," she said. "Like everyone else in the community, I hope an inquiry disproves the widespread belief the lakes are leaking away as a result of mining damage to sandstone aquifers. If this is the case, the lakes are doomed."

The mining company Xstrata Coal, which operates the Tahmoor mine, denies its longwall operations are to blame.

A spokesman for Xstrata, James Rickards, said that the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water had repeatedly assured residents and Wollondilly Council that mining had not caused the water levels to drop.

Mr Rickards said the last time there was longwall mining near the lakes was 2001 and that was 700 metres away.

Jai Rowell, the Liberal candidate for Wollondilly, said the council supported calls for an inquiry into the falling water levels.

"There is enormous anger at the refusal of the Keneally Labor government to inquire as to what has happened. We are demanding answers and a full and open investigation into what has happened to the lakes' water."

A spokeswoman for the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water said that longwall mining was not permitted in the national park and there was no evidence of longwall mining affecting the Thirlmere Lakes.

"Even with above-average regional rainfall, the water level at Thirlmere Lakes can still remain low as the lakes are dependent on rainfall that falls in the immediate lake foreshores and that can differ markedly from that of the surrounding region."