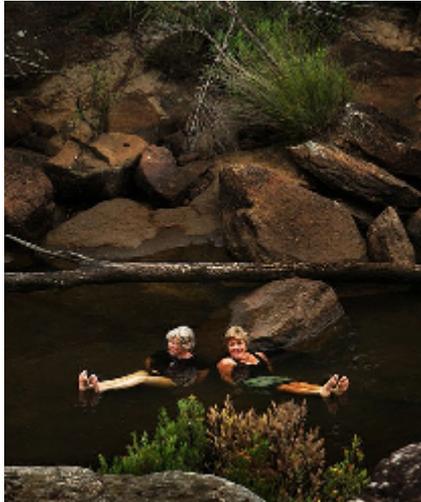


Green win signals shift in mine approvals

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Cool change ... Pat Durman and Sharyn Cullis swim in O'Hares Creek in the Dharawal State Conservation area. *Photo: Kate Geraghty*

BHP Billiton has shelved plans for a vast new coal mine under a conservation area south of Sydney, after a scathing review by the state's Planning Assessment Commission found that society would be better off if the coal remained in the ground.

The findings signal a change of direction for the state's mining approval process, with the commission also deciding that remediation by the company would not be able to make up for the environmental damage it would cause.

The project had been expected to dig up \$60 billion worth of coal over the next 30 years.

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The BHP Billiton subsidiary Illawarra Coal has put forward a new plan that will allow the 6200-hectare Dharawal State Conservation Area south-east of Campbelltown to remain undisturbed, and also excludes some sensitive water catchments near the township of Appin.

The government's commission analysed the mine's benefits in terms of jobs, economic activity and company profits and found that they did not outweigh the public benefit of having pristine bushland and water catchments close to Sydney.

"So while protection of the significant natural features would involve lower mine profitability, it is likely that society as a whole would gain more from the environmental protection recommended than it would lose in terms of foregone profits," its report said.

Although the company offered engineering solutions to some of the surface cracking and water pollution that it expected to cause, the commission decided that "remediation cannot be considered at this time to be an alternative to prevention where the functionality of water-dependent natural features is an objective".

It is "no longer a viable proposition for mining to cause more than negligible damage to pristine or near-pristine waterways in drinking water catchments", it said.

BHP Billiton had previously told the *Herald* the financial viability of the entire project hinged on being able to mine under the conservation area.

It said yesterday the revised proposal would still provide more than 2600 jobs in the region, and generate \$200 million in household income.

"Reflecting changes in community expectations, Illawarra Coal has a strong track record of demonstrated commitment to the environment, being the first to move its longwall mining away from rivers, and our [new proposal] is a further reflection of this," said the project's manager of sustainable development, John Brannon.

The Total Environment Centre, which has been campaigning against mining in Sydney's drinking water catchment, said the decisions were a "new benchmark".

"It's clear the original proposal was unacceptable on environmental and economic grounds and that the reliance on so-called remediation is a myth," said Mr Angel.

"The panel makes it clear it is not acceptable to have more than negligible damage BHP's recognition of the force of these arguments is welcomed."

The commission identified a problem with allowing mining companies to decide which natural features in their targeted areas should be granted "special significance", a status that can accord them extra protection. It noted that BHP Billiton's proposal found one area of possible special significance in the entire mining zone - the Nepean River.

"None of the other 46 streams ... none of the 226 upland swamps, none of the 634 cliffs ... and none of the 632 Aboriginal heritage sites in the study area succeeded in crossing the proponent's threshold for special significance," the report said, concluding there was "an element of subjectivity" in BHP's plan.

A hydrologist who gave evidence during the inquiry, Ann Young, said many of the swamps would have been destroyed.