

Hunter Valley Water Users Association

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Coal and Gas Strategy
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By email

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed coal and coal seam gas scoping paper.

This Association has been representing users of water from the Hunter River regulated sections for many years and currently have in excess of 300 members. Our members consist of various classes of irrigators from mainly the rural section of the valley and include the thoroughbred industry, dairy industry, vineyards, beef and cropping and include both the Pokolbin and Broke/Fordwich private irrigation districts which of course include many of the major tourist attractions in the Hunter. We also have a number of industrial water users as members. We are full members of NSW Irrigators Council and also co-ordinate discussions with water user groups from tributaries of the Hunter River and ground water users.

Over the years this association has worked closely in preparing and advising on preparation of water sharing plans for both regulated and more recently the draft macro WSP for the Hunter.

We are represented on various govt and public committees such as Hunter salinity trading scheme advisory ctte, State Water consultative Ctte, NSW farmers C& R ctte and of course many ongoing levels with Office of Water and its predecessors and constantly liaise with Macquarie Generation, Local govt and Hunter Water.

The association understands the value of the coal industry to the State, the Nation and of course the Hunter Valley in which we operate and indeed have worked very closely with mining companies over the past years in an attempt to safe guard the economic, environmental and social values of the Hunter with particular emphasis on both surface and ground water resources as to both quantity and quality as well as protection of the prime alluvial flats of the Hunter River and its tributaries.

However the rapid expansion of the industry over recent years and the seemingly lack of concern by mining companies and indeed some government departments for the protection of these irreplaceable natural resources in more recent times is extremely alarming and we applaud the decision to develop a long term strategy to ensure the rush for expansion in the mining industry is not to the detriment of all other considerations.

Terms of Reference

We are concerned that the whole direction of the strategy seems to be to justify the coal and gas industry and find ways that all other issues can be altered to allow for the expansion of coal rather than the emphasis being on sustainable practices and the concentration being on how mining can

continue to operate with minimal disruption to existing natural resources and the social fabric of the valley. Similarly the cost /benefit studies (point 5) should be over the long term, not just the life of the individual mines. Indeed recent DA and EA's seem proud to say that the damage to aquifers should return to normal after 200 years. Perhaps the socio/economic study should look at analysis over a 200 year period also.

Scoping Paper

Water Issues

The Association is amazed that such a low priority appears to be given to water issues particularly in light of a number of examples of streams being fractured by mining and these losses impacting on all other water users.

Mining should not be allowed within close proximity of streams to protect them from damage.

The open cut mining of alluvials cannot proceed without complete destruction of the shallow aquifers that not only are essential to many existing land holders but form a major part of the base flow of streams

No further developments or expansions should be approved until completion of this strategy.

The minimum requirement should be as described in the DIPNR *2005 draft stream/aquifers guidelines for coal mines*. Individual applications should only be assessed if complying with these standards and then be required for full cumulative impact study.

Adequate measure must be taken to ensure no contamination of surface or groundwater systems from either coal or coal seam gas developments

Severe penalties must be enforced and compensation paid for any damage done

Any water usage must be properly accounted for and licenced with provision being made for continuing losses following cessation of mining

Any new areas should have full independent hydrological study prepared prior to approval.

The value of the Hunter River and its tributaries cannot be over emphasised. Any permanent damage would put at risk one of the strongest food producing areas in the state, provision of water to electricity generation which supplies in excess of 50% of the states electricity, a strong tourism industry and indeed is the very lifeblood of the Hunter region.

Land Use Conflicts

It is noted reference to the protection of certain industries such as Equine industry and viticulture. We agree this is essential but believe the first priority must be protection of prime alluvial land from open cut mining. Land of such high capability is essential to guarantee future food security especially in the Hunter which is so close to major markets and at this stage has one of the safest water supplies in the state. At the same time due care must be taken to protect as far as possible the bio-diversity of the Valley as well as the social fabric of the regions.

Conclusion

HVWUA is pleased that a long term strategy for coal and coal seam gas is being prepared albeit being long overdue. Coal obviously has an important part to play but it must not be at the expense of other assets and resources. We have confined our remarks at this stage to our prime areas of concern, ie water and land use conflict, but fully appreciate the many other areas such as health, air and dust, infrastructure, housing, biodiversity, tourism, subsidence, effective rehabilitation.

Other areas of concern are of course property rights, exploration licences, labour availability and the problems of vastly differing income levels in areas undergoing such huge development in such a short timeframe. One issue that is not mentioned anywhere in the papers I have seen is the difficulty individuals and smaller organisations have in responding to the various DA and EA's where companies have vast resources to prepare these reports whilst the public do not have the resources to adequately respond. There should be some way assistance can be freely available to encourage meaningful communication.

We look forward to commenting further as the strategy is being developed and trust that the role of mining is kept in perspective.

Arthur Burns
President
11/4/2011