

Dargues Gold Mine

State Significant
Development
Modification Assessment
(10_0054 MOD 4)

May 2019

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Cover photo

Source: Big Island Mining Pty Ltd

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Big Island Mining Pty Ltd (Big Island) owns the Dargues Gold Mine (the mine), an underground gold mine, located north of Majors Creek village, approximately 13 kilometres (km) south of Braidwood on the Southern Tablelands and within the Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional local government area.

Big Island is seeking to modify its existing project approval to:

- relocate an approved heavy vehicle and infrastructure (tailings and decant water pipelines) crossing of Spring Creek used to access the waste rock emplacement area (WREA) and tailing storage facility (TSF);
- reinstate an alternative access road to the TSF from the mine access road; and
- update the project's Schedule of Land to reflect changed ownership, with Big Island acquiring a private landholding located within the project boundary.

The relocation of the Spring Creek crossing would reduce the length and disturbance area of the haul road/infrastructure corridor to the WREA and TSF. The reinstated access road would provide contingency access to the TSF. This access is via an existing access track which would require upgrading, with the route located within exotic pasture.

The Department publicly exhibited the proposed modification for 2 weeks in December 2019. The Department received nine public submissions (two supporting and seven objecting), and ten submissions from Government agencies, including Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council (none of which objected to the proposal). Except for one of the public objections raising concerns about potential visual impacts, all the matters raised in the public objections were about the merits of the mine as a whole, rather than any specific aspect of the proposal.

Assessment

The Department assessed the potential impacts of the revised haulage routes on biodiversity, Aboriginal heritage, visual amenity, water, air quality, greenhouse gas emissions and noise. The Department considers that these impacts would not increase because of the modification and would continue to be adequately managed via the existing conditions of approval and updated management plans.

Importantly, there would be a reduction in the impacts on biodiversity values associated with the Spring Creek crossing, with a net reduction in impact on vegetation integrity and abundance associated with native vegetation around the Spring Creek crossing. This followed a quantiative analysis with additional vegetation surveys completed at the request of the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH). Both the Department and OEH are satisfied that the impacts to biodiveristy values would be reduced with the modification proposal.

Summary

The proposed modification would improve the efficiency and operation of the mine and would not increase or would reduce some impacts, such as on biodiversity, compared to the approved project.

Given these benefits can be achieved with no increase in environmental impacts, the Department considers that the proposed modification application is in the public interest, and should be approved, subject to conditions.



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1. Introduction

Big Island Mining Pty Ltd (Big Island) is a subsidiary of Dargues Gold Mine Pty Ltd and operates the Dargues Gold Mine, which is an underground gold mine located within the Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional local government area (see **Figure 1**). The mine is surrounded by agricultural, rural-residential and conservation land uses. The closest urban settlement is the village of Majors Creek, located immediately south of the mine.

The Dargues Gold Mine Project (the project) was approved in 2011 by the then Planning Assessment Commission. However, the merits of the decision were appealed in the NSW Land and Environment Court (LEC). On 8 February 2012, the LEC approved the mine by issuing consent orders and a revised project approval (10_0054).

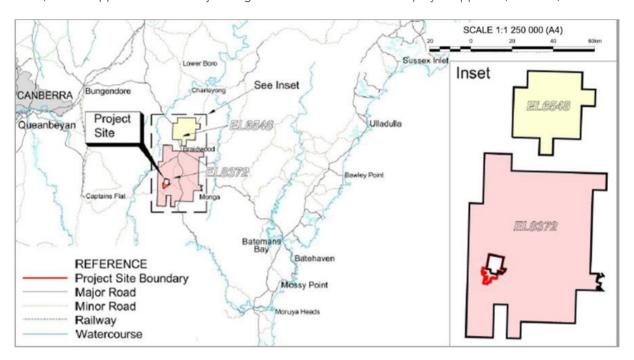


Figure 1 | Regional Context Map

The project approval has been modified three times and allows Big Island to:

- extract and process up to 355,000 tonnes of gold ore per annum from the underground workings to a maximum of 1.6 million tonnes of ore over the life of the project (until 30 June 2025);
- backfill the underground mine with paste fill (a mixture of tailing and cement) and waste rock;
- construct and operate surface infrastructure, including a water management system, a processing plant to produce an ore concentrate, a tailings storage facility (TSF) and a waste rock emplacement area (WREA); and
- transport the ore concentrate from the mine via road for further processing, noting that the processing of the ore is subject to a separate approval at Westlime Pty Ltd's processing facility located in Parkes.

Construction of the project commenced in February 2013, however this was followed by a period of care and maintenance. Construction of surface infrastructure for the project commenced in March 2017, with development of the underground operations commencing in May 2018. Full-scale operations, including construction of the processing plant, have not yet commenced.



Big Island proposes to revise the approved project to optimise on-site operation and truck haulage to the WREA and the TSF. The proposed modification is described in the Statement of Environmental Effects (SEE) and additional information provided by Big Island (see **Appendix B** and **Appendix F**) and summarised below. The proposed amendments to the project layout are shown in **Figure 2**, and include two components, an alternative haul road crossing of Spring Creek, and the use of a previously approved alternative access road to the TSF.

Big Island is also seeking an administrative modification to the Schedule of Lands for the project area to change the ownership status of one lot, as it has now acquired the property.

2.1 Spring Creek Crossing

Big Island proposes to relocate the approved heavy vehicle crossing over Spring Creek approximately 400 m upstream (north) of the approved crossing within the project area. The proposed change would result in a shorter and more direct haulage route for transporting the waste rock to the WREA and the TSF. As per the approved crossing, the proposed crossing would be an unsealed all-weather compacted road and would be used as a one-lane road for heavy vehicles when transporting the waste rock, or as a two-lane road when restricted to light vehicle traffic.

The indicative design criteria would be similar to the approved crossing, including a road width of approximately 6.5 m (about 2.5 m wider than the approved design), length of approximately 300 m (about 400 m shorter than the approved route) and installation of erosion and sediment control consistent with management measures required under the approved project.

The proposed relocation of the Spring Creek crossing would shorten the haulage route between the main mine infrastructure area and WREA by more than 50%. This would reduce the disturbance area and required construction work, which in turn would reduce dust emissions and noise generation during construction and operations. The new crossing would be retained following the final site decommissioning to facilitate future access (e.g. for agricultural use).

The proposed crossing over Spring Creek would also be used to install the tailings decant return pipelines between the processing plant and the TSF.

Big Island has advised that the paste fill pipeline route has been revised and would no longer use the Spring Creek crossing to access the paste fill hole. Instead, the paste fill pipeline would be run directly from the processing plant to the box cut through the controlled drainage area and then underground via the decline (see **Appendix F**). This would provide improved environmental outcomes including reduction in surface disturbance area and pumping distances.

2.2 Tailings Storage Facility Access Road

The modification application seeks to reinstate an originally approved haulage road between the TSF and the site access road, using an existing farm track. Following the approval of Modification 3, this road was removed from the project approval and replaced by the road connecting the box cut, WREA and TSF incorporating the heavy vehicle crossing over Spring Creek.

As in the original approval, the purpose of this road would be to allow vehicle access to the TSF for inspection, maintenance and construction purposes. The proposed reinstatement would involve upgrading the existing track into an unsealed all-weather compacted road suitable for heavy and light vehicles. This would provide an alternative access to the TSF once the WREA is constructed.

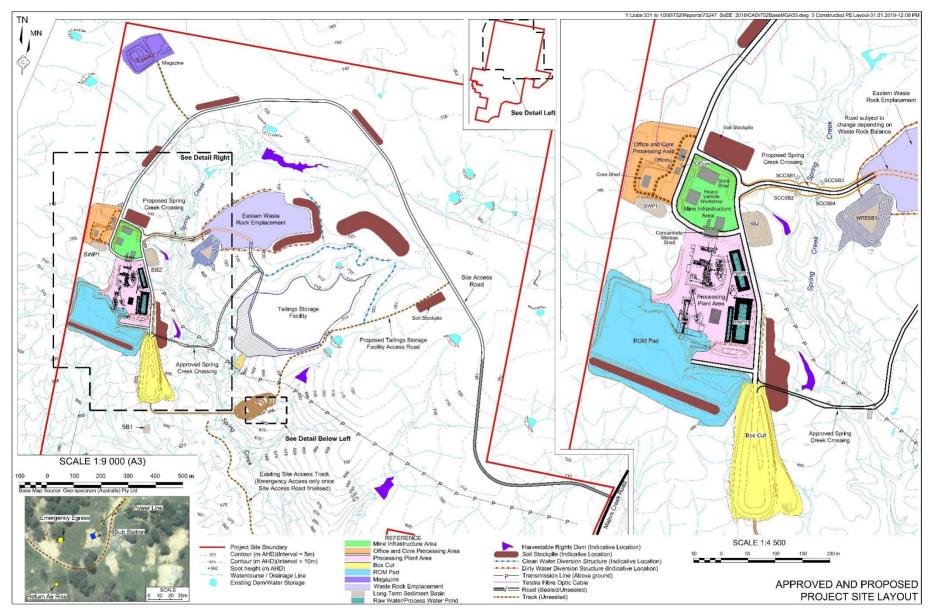


Figure 2 | Modification Layout.



3. Statutory Context

3.1 Scope of Modification

The project was originally approved under Part 3A of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (EP&A Act) by the LEC in February 2012 following a merit appeal.

Under clause 6 of Schedule 2 of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment (Savings, Transitional and Other Provisions) Regulation 2017*, the project was transitioned to State Significant Development (SSD) by order, which took effect by publication in the NSW Government Gazette on 23 November 2018.

The Department of Planning and Environment (the Department) has considered the relevant "matters of consideration" in accordance with the EP&A Act and is satisfied that the application is substantially the same development as modified prior to being transitioned from Part 3A to SSD as it would not change the approved mining areas, mining, processing or transport methods.

Consequently, the Department considers that the proposed modification application is within the scope of Section 4.56 of the EP&A Act.

3.2 Consent Authority

The Minister for Planning and Public Spaces is the consent authority for this modification application. However, under the Minister's delegation of 11 October 2017, the Executive Director, Resource Assessments and Business Systems, may determine the application. This is because a political disclosure statement has not been made by Big Island, Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council (the Council) did not object to the proposal, and less than 25 public objections were received.



4. Engagement

The Department publicly exhibited the modification application and accompanying documents for two weeks from 5 December 2018 to 19 December 2018, advertised the exhibition in the "Canberra-Queanbeyan Chronicle" and "Braidwood Times", and notified the LEC as well as over 1,000 members of the public who made a submission to the original project application in 2010, in accordance with Section 4.56(1)(c) of the EP&A Act.

4.1 Submissions and Response to Submissions

During the exhibition, the Department received a total of 19 submissions on the modification application, including nine public submissions and advice from ten government agencies. No submissions were received from special interest groups. A full copy of the submissions is available in **Appendix C**.

The Department notes most public submissions were in the nature of objections (seven out of nine) and two were in support. Six public submissions were made from addresses within the local area (Postcode 2622), two in support and 4 objections. None of the public authorities raised any significant concerns or objected to the modification application, including the Council.

Big Island provided a Response to Submissions (RTS) to all matters raised and the Department placed a copy of the RTS on its website and forwarded it to agencies for further advice as required (see **Appendix D**).

4.2 Key Issues – Government Agencies

The **Office of Environment and Heritage** (OEH) requested further information on the biodiversity assessment of the proposed modification, in particular, to provide further evidence that there would be no increase in impacts on biodiversity values when compared to the approved project. This related to providing quantitative values for vegetation integrity scores (VIS) for both the proposed and approved crossings in accordance with the Biodiversity Assessment Method (BAM).

Big Island provided the additional information (see **Appendix F**) and the Department's consideration of these matters is discussed in **section 5**. OEH also recommended that the company should engage with the Registered Aboriginal Parties during the development of the project, which is consistent with the existing conditions of project approval. The Department and OEH are satisfied these matters have been addressed.

The **Department of Industry – Lands & Water** (Dol – L&W) recommended review of the surface water and groundwater monitoring triggers as well as updating the relevant management plans to reflect any changes because of the proposed modification and ensure consistency with the *Natural Resources Access Regulator's Guidelines for Controlled Activities*. It also provided general advice about requirements relating to crown land within the project area. The Department notes that this advice is consistent with the existing conditions of project approval.

The **Division of Resources and Geoscience** (DRG) and **Resources Regulator** (RR) within the Department were satisfied that the modification can be effectively managed through the existing conditions of the project approval, and its requirements under the *Mining Act 1992*. DRG noted that the application does not propose any changes to the approved mining areas, ore processing rate, mine life, mining methods or ore reserve, and the RR was satisfied that the proposed modification would not change rehabilitation requirements.

Roads and Maritime Services (RMS) had no objections to the proposal and confirmed that the proposed modification is unlikely to impact the relevant key State road (Kings Highway).

WaterNSW confirmed that the proposed modification is outside the Sydney Drinking Water Catchment and unlikely to impact on its quality. However, it requested to continue to be consulted on any updated plans and future modifications. Big Island committed to meet this request in its Response to Submissions.

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA), Dams Safety Committee (DSC), OEH Heritage Division and the Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council did not object to the modification application and made no recommendations in addition to the current project approval conditions.

4.3 Key Issues – General Public

Public objections raised concerns about the adverse impacts of mining developments in general including the project, and not specifically on the proposed modification activities. The concerns included environmental and climate change risks and the need to prioritise renewable energy. Only one of the public objections raised concern about the impacts of the proposed modification, which was in relation to visual impacts on neighbouring properties and the village of Majors Creek.

The two supporting submissions were also from the local area (Majors Creek and Araluen) and noted the economic benefits of the project and positive environmental outcomes of the proposed relocation of the Spring Creek crossing, including erosion, air quality (road dust) and noise.

The Department also received comments from a member of the public after the formal public exhibition period was closed. This raised concerns about the merits of the project, its climate change impacts, details of the TSF layout and design and changes in Big Island's Statement of Commitments in Modification 3. The Department has considered these concerns and notes that they are not material to this modification application and that the final and detailed design of the TSF is subject to DSC requirements under the *Dams Safety Act 2015*.



The Department has undertaken a comprehensive assessment of the merits of the modification application and has considered the application documents, including:

- the SEE and existing conditions of approval;
- submissions;
- Big Island's RTS and additional supporting information; and
- the mandatory requirements of the EP&A Act.

The Department notes that many of the issues raised in the public objections relate to the merits and environmental impacts of the project, rather than any specific aspect of the proposed modification application. The Department also notes that the economic, social and environmental impacts of the project were fully assessed in accordance with the EP&A Act in the granting of the original project approval with the merits of the project tested in the LEC.

A list of the key documents that informed the Department's assessment is provided in **Appendix A**.

The upgrade and use of the TSF access road were originally approved by the LEC in 2012. The proposed road would upgrade an existing farm track within exotic pasture and would require minor construction works. The Department considers that reinstatement of the TSF access road would be of minimal environmental impact. The key issue for the proposal relates to the potential biodiversity impacts of the new crossing location. The Department has also considered other potential impacts associated with the proposed modification activities in **section 5.2**.

5.1 Biodiversity

Under the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 (BC Act), the biodiversity impacts of modification applications are required to be assessed using the BAM and documented in a Biodiversity Development Assessment Report (BDAR). However, for modification applications, a BDAR is not required if the consent authority is satisfied that the modification would <u>not increase</u> the impact on biodiversity values. The biodiversity values are defined in the BC Act and relate to vegetation abundance and integrity, habitat suitability, threatened species abundance and movement, habitat connectivity, flight path integrity and water sustainability.

Assessment of Likely Impacts

Ecological Australia undertook a comparative assessment of the impact on biodiversity values of the approved project against the modification proposal and concluded that there would be a reduced impact on biodiversity values, noting that the flight path integrity biodiversity value is not relevant for this project. In comparing the two crossings Ecological identified that:

• the proposed location had previously been a crossing, with a concrete ford and disturbed land on either side of the crossing;

- it is a shorter distance from the mine infrastructure area to the WREA and TSF that is less vegetation disturbance (see **Table 1** below); and
- there would be no clearing of mature trees with removal of low condition native pasture and some acacia regrowth at the proposed crossing, compared to removal of habitat trees at the approved crossing;

OEH and the Department were generally satisfied with Ecological's conclusion; however, OEH requested additional quantitative supporting evidence that the vegetation integrity score (VIS, a measure of the condition of the vegetation) was the same or less than that of the approved haul road and crossing.

To demonstrate that the modification would not result in an increase in biodiversity impacts, Big Island commissioned an additional vegetation assessment, including mapping the vegetation zones and quantification of the VIS at both the approved and proposed crossing locations (see **Appendix F**).

The vegetation maps show that vegetation type of the approved and proposed crossings is the same, consisting of heavily disturbed Acacia regrowth, with the following Plant Community Types (PCTs) occurring within the modification footprint (see **Figure 3**): PCT 1100 *Ribbon Gum-Snow Gum grassy forest on damp flats eastern South Eastern Highlands Bioregion* and PCT 1101 *Ribbon Gum-Snow Gum grassy open forest on flats and undulating hills of the Eastern Tableland*).

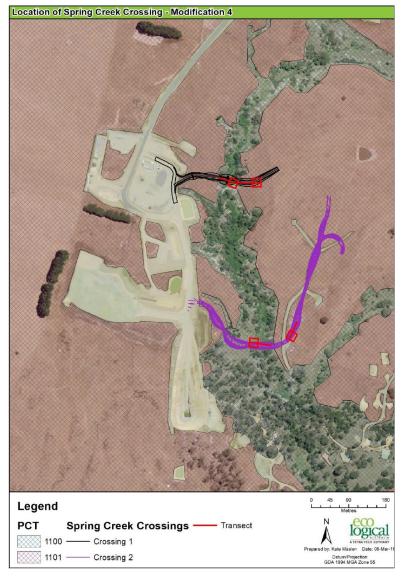


Figure 3 | Vegetation Mapping of the Modification Area

These PCTs have similar species composition and a form of the Threatened Ecological Community (TEC) *Tableland Basalt Forest in the Sydney Basin and South Eastern Highlands Bioregions* under the BC Act. However, the condition of the vegetation is such that Ecological concluded that these PCTs were not TECs.

The Ribbon Gum Forest adjacent to the approved crossing has a larger patch size and better condition compared to the fragmented forest adjacent to the proposed crossing, which consists of sparse eucalypts. Construction of the proposed crossing would avoid one Snow Gum tree outside the disturbance footprint. The approved crossing would result in removal of 2-3 Ribbon Gum trees and 5 mature regrowth trees (*Acacia melanoxylon*). The proposed crossing requires less clearing of mature vegetation and mature habitat trees.

Table 1 below compares the VIS score and area of clearing for the approved crossing and proposed crossing which confirmed that overall there would be a reduction in biodiversity impacts associated with vegetation abundance and integrity for the two PCTs impacted. Accordingly, as the proposed modification would not increase the biodiversity impacts of the approved mine, the Department and OEH are satisfied that a BDAR is not required for this modification application.

Table 1 | Vegetation Integrity Scores.

PCT ID	Crossing	Area (ha)	VIS
PCT 1100	Proposed	0.08	11.9
ret 1100	Approved	0.24	41.3
PCT 1101	Proposed	0.46	27.3
rei IIII	Approved	0.65	27.3

Summary

The proposed modification components have been designed to avoid areas of native vegetation, threatened species and habitat. Both the approved and proposed crossings have historically been cleared and subjected to erosion due to alluvial mining. The propose reinstatement of the TSF access road, that was approved in the original application, can be undertaken with minimal environmental impact, which involves an upgrade of an existing access track located within exotic pasture.

Assessment of the biodiversity impacts of the proposed crossing demonstrated that they would be the same or less than the biodiversity values associated with the approved crossing, due to the lower condition of the vegetation cover and use of a shorter and more direct route.

The existing project approval sets out a range of conditions to avoid, mitigate and offset the biodiversity impacts, including on preparation and implementation of the Biodiversity Offset Strategy, Biodiversity Management Plan and Conservation Bond in consultation with the OEH. Under the existing approval conditions, these documents must be reviewed and revised following the approval of any modification application.

5.2 Other Issues

The Department's consideration of other issues is summarised in **Table 2**.

Table 2 Other Issues.

Issue	Findings	Recommended Conditions
Aboriginal Heritage	 The modification areas are located within disturbed areas, subject to previous Aboriginal heritage surveys and impact assessments undertaken in 2010 and 2015. 	 Comply with the existing conditions and no additional conditions are required.

Issue	Findings	Recommended Conditions
	 No Aboriginal cultural heritage items were found within the proposed modification disturbance areas. The existing conditions require Big Island to prepare and implement an Aboriginal Heritage Management Plan (AHMP) which includes measures for protecting known sites, salvaging sites within the disturbance area and ongoing consultation with the Aboriginal community. The AHMP must be revised following the approval of any modification application, in consultation with OEH and the Aboriginal community. The Department and OEH consider that the proposed medification is unlikely to impose the proposed and difference in unlikely to impose the proposed and difference in unlikely to impose the proposed. 	
Visual	 modification is unlikely to impact Aboriginal heritage values. The project site is visible from residences to the south-east, south and south-west and from motorists on Majors Creek Road. However, the modification areas are largely obstructed by vegetation. The existing project approval includes requirements to limit the visibility of construction and operational areas and to consider any reasonable request by affected residents to mitigate the visual impacts of the project. The Department considers that visual impacts of the proposed modification activities on the surrounding residences or road users would not be significant. 	Comply with the existing conditions and no additional conditions are required.
Water	 The proposed modification would not alter any water supply, water access license or use of the approved project. Water, erosion and sediment impacts of the proposed TSF access road were considered in the original project approval. The sediment and erosion measures associated with construction and operation of the approved crossing would continue to apply to the proposed crossing. The proposed crossing would require less construction work and therefore reduce the potential for sediment and erosion risks. The Department considers that the proposed modification would not have significant impacts on water resources and any likely risks can be avoided and mitigated through the existing approval conditions and revision of the Water Management Plan, including potential surface and groundwater quality impacts from decant return and underground paste fill operations. Big Island is required to operate in accordance with an Environment Protection Licence (EPL) regulated by the EPA. The EPA reviewed the proposal and advised that it had no comment or recommended conditions in addition to that 	Comply with the existing conditions and no additional conditions are required.
Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas	 already required. The proposed new location of the crossing would result in a significantly shorter haulage road. In turn, there would be less road dust and diesel emissions than the approved crossing during construction and operation. The Department considers that air quality and greenhouse gas emissions from the modification activities would be consistent with the relevant criteria in the existing approval conditions, and any likely risks can be avoided and mitigated through the existing project approval and management plans. The Department notes the required revision of the approved Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Management Plan would include updating the requirements for monitoring and reporting of total suspended particulate matter and particulate matter smaller than 10 µm (PM₁₀) (currently these are required when operations commence). 	Comply with the existing conditions and no additional conditions are required.
Noise	 Noise impacts associated with the construction and operation of the proposed TSF access road were considered in the original project approval. 	Comply with the existing conditions and

Issue	Findings	Recommended Conditions
	 Noise associated with construction and operation of the proposed crossing would be consistent with the approved crossing with the location of the crossing further away from Majors Creek village. Big Island is required to meet strict noise criteria with the noise limits set at the lowest level of 35 dB(A) possible under NSW government noise policy. The Department is satisfied that noise from the modification activities would be consistent with the approved project. Noise impacts would be managed through an approved Noise Management Plan, which includes requirements for monitoring and noise mitigation measures to be applied to ensure compliance with noise limits. 	no additional conditions are required.
	• The noise from the site is also regulated by the EPA under its EPL.	



6. Evaluation

The Department has assessed the modification application and supporting information in accordance with the relevant requirements of the EP&A Act.

The modification proposal seeks to change internal haul roads to improve operational efficiency in haulage of waste rock to WREA and for construction of the TSF, and to provide alternative access to the TSF. This can be done without increasing the environmental impacts of the project, with a reduction in impacts to biodiversity values associated with the Spring Creek crossing, compared to the approved project.

The proposed relocation of the crossing would shorten the haulage route between the main mine infrastructure area and WREA by more than half and reduce the associated land disturbance. In addition, the revised route for the paste fill pipeline would remove the associated surface disturbance, since it would use the underground decline corridor from the box cut.

The Department notes that the proposed modification can be undertaken in accordance with the strict requirements of the existing project approval conditions. These requirements include:

- preparation and implementation of a range of monitoring programs and management plans, in consultation with the relevant government authorities, including EPA, OEH, Dol Water and Council; and
- compliance with strict noise, air quality and water discharge requirements.

Under the existing approval, Big Island is required to review and revise any relevant monitoring programs and management plans following approval of any modification application.

The Department considers that any other residual impacts of the proposed modification activities, including potential visual and aboriginal heritage impacts, can be adequately managed and mitigated by the existing project approval and updated management plans and monitoring programs, in consultation with the relevant agencies.

The Department has recommended the following changes to the project approval:

- inclusion of the modification proposal in the project description;
- changes to definitions due to government agency, legislative changes and standard definitions;

- administrative changes to reflect the Department's standard approach for incident and non-compliance notification and reporting; and
- update to the project's Schedule of Land to reflect Big Island's acquisition of a private landholding within the project boundary.

Given the benefits of the proposed modification can be achieved with no significant increase or a reduction in environmental impacts, the Department considers that the proposed modification application is in the public interest, and should be approved, subject to the revised conditions.



7. Recommendation

The Department has drafted a Notice of Modification (see **Appendix G**) for the modification application, as well as a consolidation version of the project approval as modified (see **Appendix H**).

It is recommended that the Executive Director, Resource Assessments and Business Systems, as delegate of the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces:

- **considers** the findings and recommendations of this report;
- **determines** that the application (10_0054 MOD 4) falls within the scope of section 4.56 of the EP&A Act;
- **accepts and adopts** all of the findings and recommendations in this report as the reasons for making the decision to grant approval to the application;
- **modifies** the approval (10_0054); and
- signs the attached approval of the modification (Appendix G).

Recommended by:

Mandana Mazaheri

Senior Environmental Assessment Officer

Resource and Energy Assessments

n. Naron 21/5/19

Recommended by:

Stephen O'Donoghue

A/Director

Resource and Energy Assessments





Allto 23/5/19

David Kitto

Executive Director

Resource Assessments and Business Systems



Appendix A – List of Documents

Dargues Gold Mine Mod 4 - Statement of Environmental Effects, R.W. CORKERY & CO. PTY. LIMITED, November 2018, and associated Appendices.

Dargues Gold Mine Mod 4 Response to Submissions Report, R.W. CORKERY & CO. PTY. LIMITED, January 2019.

Additional Ecological Report at Dargues Gold Mine, ECO LOGICAL Australia Pty Ltd, March 2019.

Environmental Assessment for the Dargues Gold Mine – Modification 3, Appendix 11: Aboriginal Heritage Assessment. artefact. July 2015.

Dargues Reef Gold Project, Aboriginal Heritage Assessment, Specialist Consultant Studies Compendium Volume 2, Part 5a. Archaeological Surveys & Reports Pty Ltd. September 2010.

Appendix B – Statement of Environmental Effects

Appendix C – Submissions

Appendix D – Response to Submissions

Appendix E – Additional Agency Submissions

Appendix F – Additional Information

Appendix G – Notice of Modification

Appendix H – Consolidated Project Approval

See the Department's website at:

https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/project/11706