HVO South (Singleton Shire) and HVO North (Muswellbrook Shire) Open Cut Coal Continuation Project,

Submission to NSW Government

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About Doctors for the Environment Australia

Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) is an independent, non-government organisation of medical doctors in all Australian states and territories.

DEA's work is based on the premise that humans need a future with clean air and water, healthy soils capable of producing nutritious food, a stable climate, and a complex, diverse and interconnected humanity whose needs are met in a sustainable way. We are therefore interested in environmental protection and restoration to promote human health and social stability.

Acknowledgement of Country

DEA's members live and work around Australia. We would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of these lands, in the spirit of reconciliation.

We recognise that First Nations peoples have cared for Country and lived sustainably for millennia, and that sovereignty of this land was never ceded. We pay our respects to First Nations Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders.

Summary

Doctors for the Environment opposes the HVO North and South Continuation projects for the following reasons:

- the burning of coal mined will exacerbate climate change, harm human health and cause hardship and economic losses for the people of NSW and elsewhere in the world
- the justification for the mine is based on incorrect logic and, in some cases, false information
- the design of the mine is sited very close to the Hunter river, the main ecological artery of the region. In normal years this will damage the river, and in flood years the river is likely to damage the mine.

Detail

The earth is warming and this is caused by greenhouse gases (GHG).

Increased temperature has many adverse effects on health. The most direct and obvious is through deaths during heatwaves, floods and fires, however less direct health effects occur due to droughts, expanding tropical diseases and disruption due to rising sea levels.[1] To Doctors for the Environment Australia, limiting global heating is a matter of preventative health on the grand scale.

The atmospheric concentration of CO_2 has risen from pre industrial levels of 280 ppm to a 2025 level of nearly 430 ppm.[2] This has increased global long term average temperature by 1.2 degrees, with the hottest single year being 2024 at 1.3 degrees above pre industrial levels.[3] As there is momentum in climate systems, even the current level of greenhouse gases with no further emissions would be likely to push global temperatures beyond the 1.5 degree threshold.

Australia has committed to the Paris Agreement goals of limiting global heating to 2 degrees, and preferably 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. There is, however, a 90% chance that continuation of current policies will result in 2.3 to 4.5 degrees of global heating.[4] This shows an important disconnect between what is needed and what is actually being done both in Australia and around the world.

Australia has a national target of reducing onshore GHG emissions by 43% by 2030, which is not sufficient to prevent dangerous global heating, but is commensurate with the efforts of other countries. Australia however is a major exporter of fossil fuels. In 2022, Australia contributed 4.5% of global fossil fuel emissions, but only 1.0% was emitted within our country – that is, exports make up 80% of Australia's fossil fuel footprint.[5] The accounting system developed for the Koyoto agreement, and continued for the Paris agreement regards the emissions from Australian coal burned in another country to be the responsibility of that country. This convention ignores the laws of physics that tell us GHG emissions will damage the climate in Australia, no matter in which country they are released.

There is a false argument that if foreign countries were not burning fossil fuel from Australia they would be directly substituting it with fuel from another source. This has been called 'the drug dealer's defence'. It was dealt with in a 2019 judgement by Justice Preston of the NSW Land and Environment court in a decision about a different coal mine.[6] [para 545]

> *There is also a logical flaw in the market substitution assumption. If a development will cause an environmental impact that is found to be unacceptable, the environmental impact does not become acceptable because a hypothetical and uncertain alternative development might also cause the same unacceptable environmental impact. The environmental impact remains unacceptable regardless of where it is caused. The potential for a hypothetical but uncertain alternative development to cause the same unacceptable environmental impact is not a reason to approve a definite development that will certainly cause the unacceptable environmental impacts. In this case, the potential that if the Project were not to be approved and therefore not cause the unacceptable GHG emissions and climate change impacts, some other coal mine would do so, is not a reason for approving the Project and its unacceptable GHG emissions and climate change impacts.*

The risks are becoming better understood.

The National Climate Risk Assessment released in September 2025 details the risks to Australia from climate disruption in greater detail and with more certainty than previous work. For instance, a 3 degrees of warming scenario will increase heat wave deaths in Sydney by 440%, and the number of people living in areas exposed to coastal hazards will reach 1.5 million by 2050.[7] The economic disruption of 1.5 million people living in homes that are uninsurable, hence ineligible for bank finance, will far outweigh any temporary economic benefit from continued coal mining.

The mine extension is not justified by the arguments given in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Arguments for the mine extension are presented in the EIS in section ES3.1.

'overall coal consumption in developing and emerging market economies is expected to continue a more sustained rise'.

This statement predicts that the world will fail to reach the zero carbon targets of the Paris agreement, and it seems the project proponent is comfortable with pushing the world to a climate that is unliveable for many.

ES 3.2 claims that 70% of NSW electricity is derived from coal.

This is factually incorrect, as in the year to September 2025, only 56.6% of NSW electricity was from coal. The EIS is not yet 3 years old but this argument is well and truly out of date. The role of coal in the NSW electricity grid is shrinking fast, and domestic generation is in no way a justification for opening new mines or extending old ones. The global installation rate of photovoltaic generation is 1 GW per day so the world is changing much faster than was predicted even a few years ago.

ES 3.3 contains the illogical statement that the mine will 'give local communities time to adapt'.

This is a misunderstanding of the concept of adaptation. Telling people that they can just keep digging up coal like previously prevents the necessary changes in coal mining regions. There are large workforce needs in building the new energy economy and many good new jobs in the Hunter region – the mines competing for the available workforce just prevents adaptation. Full speed production until the market collapses is not a good recipe for adaptation. Ceasing production at the end of the current approval will still require a large number of jobs in mine rehabilitation.

The mine encroaches on the Hunter River.

Figure ES4 shows the Riverview mine pit hard up against the banks of Hunter River. This is highly likely to disturb the alluvial water table, and will need a very large levee bank to keep flood waters out of the mine. A levee designed for a 1:1000 flood is proposed. This seems unwarranted faith in flood forecasting. The Lismore 2022 floods showed the increasing unpredictability of severe rain events driven by climate change, to which this proposal would contribute. Despite the optimistic predictions of the hydrology report, it is not prudent to dig an open pit mine right up to the banks of a river with substantial flood potential. Flooding of the mine would contaminate the river and cause potentially irreversible ecological damage.

The applications to continue mining at HVO North and HVO South Open Cut Coal Mines should be rejected.

References

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