

Submission Opposing Wilpinjong Coal Mine Modification 3 (*Pit 8 Extension*)

Submitted by: Michael Fetch

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Contact: mickfetch@bigpond.com

Summary of Objection

I, Michael Fetch, strongly oppose the proposed Wilpinjong Coal Mine Modification 3 (Pit 8 Extension).

My family has lived and worked continuously in the Wollar district for more than 150 years, contributing to and cherishing the strong sense of community that once defined our village.

The Wilpinjong Mine has decimated that community — socially, environmentally, and emotionally.

This modification is not a minor change to existing operations; it is a major new expansion that will extend destructive impacts on the Wollar district for another decade or more.

It fails the “substantially the same” test for a modification, introduces new and unacceptable impacts on residents, the environment, and community facilities, and further delays the long-overdue process of mine closure and community recovery.

For the reasons outlined below, I urge the Department to refuse Wilpinjong Modification 3 in its entirety.

1. Background and Personal Connection

My family has deep and enduring roots in Wollar.

For over a century and a half, we have lived, worked, and contributed to this village and surrounding lands.

Although I now reside in the lower Hunter region, I maintain an active connection to Wollar. I lease a parcel of land in the village for grazing and continue to invest time and resources in its upkeep — maintaining fences, controlling weeds, and improving the property as required under my lease.

I am an active member of the community, regularly attending events at the Wollar Community Hall and serving on the executive of the Wollar Progress Association. Despite the mine’s efforts to erase what remains of our township, a small but determined group of residents and families continues to uphold Wollar’s spirit.

It is undisputed that Wollar’s population declined in the years preceding mining activity, but what has occurred since Wilpinjong’s arrival is not a natural demographic shift — it is the result of a deliberate campaign by Peabody Energy, an American mining giant, to systematically depopulate the village and silence community opposition.

This submission represents not just my personal objection, but the deep concern shared by those who remain connected to Wollar and hope to see the village revived once the mine finally closes.

2. Mod 3 as Part of a Larger Expansion Project

The proponent's own documents confirm that Modification 3 is only one stage of a broader plan to extend Wilpinjong operations further east and north toward Wollar Village.

From the Main Report Executive Summary (p ES-1):

“Approval of the Modification would therefore support the contribution of ROM coal extraction and employment levels while WCP evaluates opportunities to develop a future Wilpinjong Coal Mine SSD extension proposal (e.g. in EL 9399).”

This statement makes clear that Peabody is already preparing a future State Significant Development (SSD) proposal for further expansion — directly opposite Wollar Village, within exploration licence EL 9399.

Minutes from the Community Consultative Committee (CCC) meeting of 3 September 2025 confirm this:

Enquiry: “When will the scoping letter for Pits 9 & 10 be lodged?”

Answer: “Estimated early 2029.”

This demonstrates that Mod 3 is not an isolated modification but a stepping stone toward a much larger project, creating a false sense of incrementalism to avoid full scrutiny of the mine's total cumulative impacts.

3. Mod 3 Is Not Substantially the Same as the Existing Approval

Modification 3 should not be assessed under Section 4.55 of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act because it fails the “substantially the same” test.

The proposed Pit 8 Extension falls outside the current mining lease and approval boundaries.

It directly adjoins the Wollar Village boundary, with no ridgeline separating the mine from the village — exposing residents to noise, dust, blasting, and light pollution.

It extends social impacts and community uncertainty, undermining any prospect of recovery for Wollar.

It encroaches on the Wollar Creek catchment, threatening water quality and biodiversity.

It destroys an endangered microbat hotspot and newly recorded areas of Aboriginal cultural heritage significance.

It extends coal transport and road traffic, prolonging disruption to local infrastructure.

This proposal represents a new mining footprint, not a modification of existing operations, and should therefore be refused.

4. Visual Impacts

The visual assessment in the Main Report (p.140–158) gravely understates the real-world impact on Wollar and surrounding landscapes.

Wollar Village is incorrectly categorised under LCZ4 with no recognition of the Wollar Recreation Ground as a community facility.

The report's classification of Wollar as "high sensitivity" but "low magnitude of impact" is indefensible. The true impact is high for all visual and landscape categories, including agricultural land and the adjoining Goulburn River National Park.

Photographic viewpoints used (particularly Viewpoint 2 and Viewpoint 3) are misleading — they are taken from distances or angles that conceal the direct line of sight from Mogo Road and the village toward the proposed pit.

There is no ridgeline shielding Wollar Village from the proposed operations. Residents, visitors, and those attending community events at the hall or recreation ground will be exposed to direct views of machinery, overburden, and dust plumes.

The visual intrusion will further deter visitors, undermine tourism potential linked to the National Park, and perpetuate the loss of community amenity.

5. Noise Impacts

Noise from existing Wilpinjong operations already exceeds acceptable community thresholds and contributes to chronic stress, anxiety, and sleep disturbance among remaining residents.

The Noise Impact Assessment for Mod 3 is inadequate and misleading:

It fails to acknowledge that the new pit is closer to the village and several private properties at lower altitudes, where sound carries further.

It omits assessment of Low Frequency Noise (LFN), despite this being a known problem at Wilpinjong.

The assessment understates noise levels at Wollar Community Hall, which serves as a designated Neighbourhood Safe Place under the RFS — where people may be required to shelter or sleep during emergencies.

No noise criteria have been established for the Wollar Recreation Ground as a community facility.

As found in the Rocky Hill Land and Environment Court judgment, compliance with numerical noise criteria does not negate the social impacts of intrusiveness and cumulative annoyance. These impacts contribute directly to the degradation of social cohesion and community wellbeing — valid grounds for refusal.

6. Dust and Air Quality

The Air Quality Assessment is deeply flawed and fails to reflect real conditions in Wollar:

It relies on data from wet years (2022–23), excluding drought and bushfire periods that better represent regional extremes.

The model area omits several properties already known to experience excessive dust deposition.

Dust management on windy days has consistently failed, as evidenced by ongoing community complaints.

Spontaneous combustion odours are poorly controlled and recorded as a leading cause of complaints.

The assessment itself shows that PM10 and PM2.5 levels will approach or exceed national standards near community facilities, meaning residents and visitors will at times breathe air above safe limits.

The Rocky Hill judgment again makes clear that perceived and real threats to residents' health are legitimate social impacts under planning law.

7. Social Impacts and Community Recovery

The Social Impact Management Plan (SIMP) approved in May 2025 explicitly recognises that:

“The closure of WCM will be welcomed by the Village of Wollar residents and may be viewed as an opportunity for progressive regeneration of the area.”

The community has already begun to plan for that recovery. Local organisations have started exploring initiatives for repopulation, land management, and property buy-back opportunities.

Modification 3 shatters that expectation. It replaces hope with renewed uncertainty, extending mining until 2034 or beyond, when the community had been preparing for closure by December 2033.

The Social Impact Assessment accompanying Mod 3 fails to assess cumulative impacts from the three large mines operating in the region (Ulan, Moolarben, and Wilpinjong). It ignores the vulnerability of remaining residents and the profound social trauma of a community repeatedly displaced.

The proponent's own Table 12 (p.44) identifies seven positive social outcomes if the modification does not proceed, compared with only three negatives. This demonstrates clearly that refusal would deliver a net social benefit to Wollar and the broader region.

8. Conclusion

The Wilpinjong Mod 3 (Pit 8 Extension) proposal is not a simple continuation of existing mining — it is a major new incursion into land and community already pushed to its limits. It fails the legal test for a modification, underestimates its environmental and social impacts, and directly undermines the recovery and regeneration of Wollar.

After nearly two decades of disruption, it is time to allow this community — my community — the chance to heal.

For these reasons, I strongly urge the Department of Planning to refuse Wilpinjong Coal Mine Modification 3 in full.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael Fetch

Wollar Village Leaseholder

Executive Member, Wollar Progress Association