



Hunter Environment Lobby Inc.

PO Box 188
East Maitland NSW 2323
10th March 2017

HVO South Modification 5

Submission of Objection

Hunter Environment Lobby Inc. (HEL) is a regional community-based environmental organisation that has been active for more than twenty years on the issues of environmental degradation, species and habitat loss, as well as climate change.

HEL submitted an objection to the original proposal to change the conditions of approval to the Hunter Valley Operations South (HVO South) project in relation to approved biodiversity offsets at the Archerfield property.

On 15th October 2012 HEL also made a submission on the dedication of lands for offsets, so, as can be seen by our interest in the issue, we have followed this development in all its iterations.

HVO South and HVO North are one of the largest mining operations with significant cumulative environmental and social impacts in the mid Hunter. HEL strongly disputes any claim that further coal extraction will not increase those cumulative impacts.

We are very concerned that the NSW Government has consistently ignored our calls for an independent cumulative impact assessment to be conducted in the Hunter Region, particularly in regard to permanent cumulative impacts on surface and groundwater sources.

The latest proposal for increased development prompts us to highlight our key points for objection, the main one being that an increase in extraction rates of 4 mtpa will cause increased noise, dust and blasting impacts on residents and the natural environment with regional implications.

The proposal to extract coal seams lower than those approved in the consolidated PA 06_0261 approval in 2009 is not acceptable because of the extent of regional impacts.

Another key impact will be the increased overburden height of 80m which will cause visual amenity impacts and more dust at a regional level. The Hunter

has already the highest particle readings for any region in the whole of NSW, and the cumulative impact of additional dust pollution generated at higher levels (ie 240 AHD) will be immense.

The increased drawdown of groundwater by an additional 2.8 m will have a cumulative impact of nearly 10m drop in surrounding groundwater sources, this is unacceptable in an area that has multiple long term cumulative impacts on water sources in the Wollombi Brook and Hunter River catchments.

We consider that this additional drawdown on groundwater is a significant cumulative impact and should not be approved.

The proposal to increase the final void from 404ha to 523ha is unacceptable, regardless of the purported benefits. The presence of a large perpetual groundwater sink in the landscape cannot be justified. HEL believes that there should be no final voids in the Hunter. They are a money saving technique developed by mining companies that cost shifts the impacts of mining onto the environment and future generations. Many parts of the world do not accept this poor longterm outcome. It is a sign of an unviable industry.

HEL is deeply concerned by the ongoing permanent ecological damage being perpetrated in the mid Hunter.

Threatened populations of River Red Gums, Hunter Flood Plain Red Gum Woodland and Hunter Valley River Oak, and the ephemeral wetland, Carrington Billabong, will be impacted by the predicted drawdown of up to 0.5m of alluvial groundwater from the proposed modification, particularly during extended periods of drought. This is because the cumulative impact of alluvial drawdown from the current and proposed nearby mining operations has not been clearly identified.

HEL presumes that the 0.5m drawdown on alluvial aquifers is additional to current and proposed adjacent mines.

HEL contests the statement that *'the ecosystems at these locations were shown to be opportunistic groundwater users only, inhabiting the niche on the floodplain due to the flooding regime rather than water supplied directly from the groundwater system. The proposed modification does not change the local flooding regime and, therefore, impact on these ecosystems is not expected.'*¹

The statement is contradictory in that the 'opportunistic' groundwater use is during dry times. This is critical to the long term health and survival of these threatened populations and water bodies that provide critical habitat values.

One of the functions of floodwater is to top up alluvial aquifer systems to supply water to ecosystems in dry times. The change, or not, to flooding regime is immaterial. The cumulative drawdown of alluvial acquifer systems is a significant impact that cannot be so lightly dismissed.

HEL notes that discharges of polluted mine water into the Hunter River will increase, this is not an acceptable impact on an already polluted working river.

¹ HVO South Mod 5 EA Main Report p ES.9

We believe that the area of concentrated mining activity in this part of the Hunter already has too great a cumulative impact on health of residents, health of biodiversity and health of the Hunter River.

During consultation meetings local community members have communicated fear of further loss of amenity. We consider that this fear is not 'perceived' but is based on living experience of the difference between predicted impacts and the reality of living near coal mine super pits.

Residents of the Upper Hunter have borne the burden of health impacts from the enormous scale of the coal mining industry and have every right to fear further loss of amenity from this proposal.

Lastly, HEL does not consider that the information provided on the public benefit of this proposed modification is correct.

Nowhere in the documents is there a mention of the current approved production rate from the HVO combined operations. There is no indication in the Mod 5 application that there is a proposal to increase the production rate.

The application claims that additional direct economic benefits and flow-on economic effects of HVO South include \$243 million in royalties and \$160 million in taxes.² However, this doesn't appear to be attributed to Mod 5 and therefore we consider the information to be misleading.

HEL notes that a number of currently approved activities are not being undertaken to provide the public benefit they were approved on. These include the construction of the Lemington Coal Handling Plant and the mining of South Lemington Pits 1 and 2.

Once again, the environmental and social impacts of a mine approval are being delivered without the promised public benefit.

HEL considers that the cumulative environmental and social impacts of the proposed modification outweigh the perceived and likely overstated public benefit. The application should be rejected.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jan Davis', with a stylized, flowing script.

Jan Davis
President

² Ibid p ES.12