

Submission to Maules Creek Coal Project

By Rising Tide Newcastle



Figure 1: Grassy White Box in Leard State Forest that would be destroyed by Maules Creek Mine

Rising Tide Newcastle

Rising Tide is volunteer run and community based climate action group, operating in Newcastle NSW. We are deeply concerned about the significant direct impacts from the Maules Creek mega open cut coal mine in Leard State Forest, the climate change contribution and the impacts this project will have along the coal chain from mine to port to power station.

The Maules Creek mine will extract 13 million tonnes per annum (Mtpa) of run of mine (ROM) coal¹, which will ultimately contribute an additional 30 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions every year for around 30 years from the burning of its coal for electricity.² Along with two neighbouring open cut coalmines, it will destroy nationally listed and critical habitat for threatened and endangered species and significantly deplete local ground water resources.³

We recommend this project is rejected by the NSW State government due to its significant and unnecessary climate change impacts and the threat of ecosystem collapse it imposes on the Leard State Forest.

Leard State Forest is critically important to conserve

Leard State Forest is the single largest remaining stand of native vegetation on the Liverpool Plains (7,464 hectares).⁴ It includes the most extensive and intact stands of the nationally listed and critically endangered Box-Gum Woodland remaining on the Australian continent.

Leard State Forest is home to 396 native species of plants and animals, and known or likely habitat for 36 threatened species and several endangered ecological communities. The forest provides a major drought and climate change refuge. For a list of the threatened flora and fauna that Maules Creek Mine would impact, please see Appendix A (page 8).

¹ NSW Government Planning and Infrastructure (2011).

² Calculated using Australian Greenhouse Office figures: 1 tonne coal = 2.4 tonnes Co2.

³ National Parks Australia (2011).

⁴ National Parks Australia (2011).

Leard State Forest is within the Liverpool Plains province of the Brigalow Belt South bioregion, a nationally recognised biodiversity hotspot.⁵ Only 2.9% of the Brigalow Belt South bioregion within NSW is included in secure protected areas, well short of the 1% protection target that is considered necessary by both national and international standards.

The destructive impacts from Maules Creek

The Maules Creek proposal involves an open cut coal mine about 2km by 4km in size, clearing 1,665 hectares of Leard State Forest habitat, digging pits 320m metres deep,⁶ significantly impacting surface water flows, depressurising the water table across kilometers of surrounding forest and agricultural land and impacting unique groundwater dependent ecosystems.

Mining operations are set to occur for over 30 years will take place 24hrs per day, seven days a week and lead to significant light and noise disturbance, water use and dust particle emissions.⁷ The clearing will have an enormous impact on around 36 threatened species, will lead to a substantial reduction in foraging and roosting habitat, fragmentation, edge effects, increased threats from invasive species, disruption of breeding cycles and will ultimately cause a long-term decrease in the size of the populations.

Significantly, 545 hectares of forest to be cleared for this project is the White Box Grassy Woodland critically endangered ecological community. When combined with the other two open cut coalmines planned for the Leard Forest area, the total clearing of endangered communities in Leard Forest comes to over 1,169 hectares.

⁵ National Parks Australia (2011).

⁶ Bailey (2011).

⁷ Bailey (2011).

The impacts along the coal chain must be considered

The Maules Creek project's 13 million tonnes of coal is planned to travel through numerous communities on its way to the port of Newcastle – posing health, transport and noise risks right along the journey. Not only will should Maules Creek Mine consider the health impacts on the local environment and people, but also right along the coal chain, to the place where the coal is burned.

The impacts on human health and the environment from coal mining and coal burning are severe, as demonstrated in a recent article published by the Medical Journal of Australia.⁸ A recently published article in the Newcastle Herald noted that:

*Dust particles less than 10 microns in size (PM10) are linked to respiratory conditions and increased hospital admissions. Especially affected are the elderly, children and people with asthma or heart disease. Even more dangerous are the smaller particles (PM2.5), which can penetrate deep into the lungs, increasing the risk of lung cancer.*⁹

Burning coal to produce power also emits harmful heavy metals, which are damaging to human health, including sulphur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen and heavy metals such as arsenic, chromium, lead and mercury.¹⁰

Certainly here in the Hunter, the impacts of power generation are felt alarmingly, as children suffer the highest incidence of asthma attacks anywhere in Australia, and cancer clusters are frequently reported.

For the millions of people living along the coal chain, these are everyday realities that could be avoided by responsible use of energy and clean renewable energy generation.

⁸ Castleden et al. (2011).

⁹ Higginbotham and Ewald (2011).

¹⁰ Higginbotham and Ewald (2011).

Climate change impacts from coal burning

At a time when scientists across the world are in agreement about the need to bring down our carbon emissions and take action to avoid dangerous climate change¹¹, this massive coal-mining project is unacceptable. Maules Creek Coal is out of step with the urgent need to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, that is required if the world is to avoid catastrophic runaway climate change.

Even if emissions from all other sources were to cease tomorrow, the emissions from coal burning would be enough to cause catastrophic runaway climate change. Indeed, James Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Space Institute has said that ending emissions from coal "is 80% of the solution to the global warming crisis".¹²

This project will make an enormous contribution to global warming, amounting to at least 30 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions every year from burning the coal.¹³ This is equivalent to more than 15% of all emissions from NSW annually.

The excuse that other countries must burn our Australian coal to create a higher quality of life is unfounded. Right across the world communities are fighting the impacts of both coal mining and the burning of coal for electricity (See the attached September 2011 report detailing coal narratives from around the world).¹⁴

¹¹ Solomon et al. (2007).

¹² Hansen (2008).

¹³ Calculated using Australian Greenhouse Office figures: 1 tonne of coal = 2.4 tonnes of Co2.

¹⁴ Judy et al. (2011).

Recommendations:

The Maules Creek Coal Mine proposal should be rejected on the grounds of its significant and unnecessary climate change impacts and the threat of ecosystem collapse it imposes on the Leard State Forest.

At the very least, all mining companies for Maules Creek, Boggabri and Tarrawonga must reapply and re-submit their Environmental Assessments with full consideration of the cumulative impacts of all three mining proposals. This must include the climate change contribution from the burning of the coal mined and the cumulative impacts to the ecological integrity of Leard Forest, groundwater ecosystems and surrounding community impacts.

All coal chain related impacts from the mining operation must also be considered as part of the cumulative health and climate impacts from all planned mining expansions across the Hunter and the Gunnedah Basin.

Sincerely,

Annika Dean on behalf of Rising Tide Newcastle

References:

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Appendix A:

Threatened Animals Known to occur in Leard State Forest

Brown Treecreeper
Hooded Robin
Black-chinned Honeyeater
Painted Honeyeater
Pied Honeyeater
Grey-crowned Babbler
Speckled Warbler
Diamond Firetail
Varied Sittella
White-browed Woodswallow
Spotted Harrier
Little Lorikeet
Little Eagle
Turquoise Parrot
Barking Owl
Masked Owl
Black-necked Stork
Eastern False Pipistrelle
Greater Long-eared Bat
Yellow-bellied Sheath-tail Bat
Eastern Cave Bat
Eastern Bent-wing Bat
Little Pied Bat
Koala

Threatened Animals Likely to Occur in Leard State Forest

Sloane's Froglet
Swift Parrot
Square-tailed Kite
Regent Honeyeater
Large-eared Pied Bat
Spotted-tailed Quoll
Squirrel Glider
Border Thick-tailed Gecko.

Threatened Plants Known or Likely to Occur in Leard State Forest

Pomaderris queenslandica (Scant Pomaderris)
Pultenaea setulosa (Bush Pea)
Digitaria porrecta (Finger Panic Grass)
Diuris tricolor (Pine Donkey Orchid)