

LOCK THE GATE ALLIANCE

AUSTRALIANS WORKING TOGETHER TO PROTECT OUR LAND, WATER, AND FUTURE 

Lock The Gate – Hunter Region

167 Parry Street

Hamilton East 2303

Elle Donnelley

NSW Planning Department

Submitted via Department's website

Friday 6th June 2014

Dear Ms Donnelley,

This is a submission against proposed changes to the Biodiversity Offset Areas for Vale's Integra Mine Complex (08_0101 MOD 4 and 08_0102 MOD 4).

The Lock The Gate Alliance is a national network of community groups opposed to inappropriate and unsustainable mining projects. We object to the proposal on the following grounds:

- Biodiversity offsetting is worse than meaningless if offset areas are not provided with permanent protection, and if mining companies are permitted to shift their offset areas around for years after a project has commenced.
- The Integra mine complex is currently being mothballed by the company because it is unprofitable. Clearly, Vale's argument that biodiversity offset changes are needed for reasons of "economic significance" of the coal resource is bogus.
- The proponent's estimate of the value of the coal resource is not substantiated and cannot be trusted.
- The proposed new offset area for the Integra project is over 30km and is entirely within the borders of the Wollemi National Park. This will not provide any meaningful protection for ecosystems and is not in any way capable of offsetting the direct ecosystem impacts of the mining project.
- The proposed new areas will not protect the endangered Narrow-leaved Ironbark, Spotted Gum, Grey Box Open Forest.

Integra Coal's application to significantly re-jig the boundaries of its Biodiversity Offset Areas, six years after the offset was put in place, illustrates again just how meaningless and ineffectual biodiversity offsetting for mining projects is in NSW.

Biodiversity offsetting is a dubious concept, even when it is done properly. Many are sceptical that a system that allows large areas of high conservation value ecosystems to be razed in exchange for the protection of other similar ecosystems can be anything other than a major loss for biodiversity. If the 'protection' offered to offset areas is in fact weak and impermanent, and if these areas are not in fact the same ecosystems as those being bulldozed, then biodiversity offsetting not only fails to provide any environmental benefit, it is nothing more than a public relations exercise intended to create the impression that environmental impacts are being effectively managed, when they are not.

In NSW, biodiversity offsets for mining projects do not provide permanent or like-for-like protection for ecosystems that are destroyed by mining. This was first shown in the 1990s when Xstrata Coal was given permission to destroy half of the Ravensworth State Forest, containing rare and endangered ecosystems, on condition that the other half of the forest was set aside as a biodiversity offset. A few years later the mining company was given permission to destroy the other half of the forest. More recently in 2012, the Warkworth Extension Project was approved by the NSW Government, allowing Rio Tinto to mine through a large area of the extremely rare and endangered Warkworth Sands Woodland, despite setting aside the

very same block of land as a biodiversity offset less than ten years earlier.

While these are two of the more infamous and spectacular examples, they were not isolated incidents. Mining companies are routinely permitted by the NSW Government to shift their biodiversity offset areas around for years after their projects are approved, usually in order to destroy an area the company has previously promised to protect. This is exactly the case with the Integra Mod 4 proposal currently under assessment.

Integra's biodiversity offset areas are six years old. During that time, the ecosystems they were to replace have been destroyed. Now, the company wants to bulldoze through its offset area in order to access what it says is \$6.2 billion worth of more coal. It is not clear from the Environmental Assessment how much actual coal would be accessed by scrapping the offset areas, but we submit that it is unlikely to be \$6.2 billion worth, as claimed. Mining companies are infamous for grossly exaggerating the economic benefits of their projects in their planning assessment documents, as Yancoal were recently caught doing with the proposed Stratford mine expansion in the Gloucester Valley.

In any case, the value of the coal is not the point. It is the fault of the proponent alone if billions of dollars worth of coal were accidentally left under a biodiversity offset area, and not the concern of anyone else. Biodiversity offsets are meaningless if mining companies are permitted to shift them around years after a project has been developed. In the case of Integra Mod 4, the proposed new offset areas are over 30km away, literally inside the boundaries of the Wollemi National Park. The proposed new areas will not protect the endangered Narrow-leaved Ironbark, Spotted Gum, Grey Box Open Forest, which is the ecosystem it is ostensible intended to replace.

We urge the government to break with its tradition of allowing mining companies to endlessly rewrite their approval conditions after mining has commenced. This project must not be approved.

Sincerely,



Steve Phillips
Hunter Regional Coordinator
Lock The Gate Alliance
Email: sjphillips@fastmail.fm
Mobile: 0437 275 119