

The Hume Coal project

I am a resident of the Southern Highlands of NSW, and I am opposed to the Hume Coal project.

My main concern is that a coal mine at this location would be a threat to the region's water supply and to the region's agriculture, businesses and tourism.

As the Sydney-Canberra Corridor Regional Strategy 2006-2031 says [1] :

With its classic rural landscapes, historic towns and location between two major Australian cities, the Sydney-Canberra Corridor is not only an attractive place to live, but a crucial part of the State's economy and environment.

The Region is already experiencing steady growth, with around 2000 new residents each year and a healthy tourism industry.

[..]As the Region supports its own water supply and includes Sydney's drinking water catchment, it is important that the long-term strategy identifies water resources and key areas supporting biodiversity and water quality.

The Hume Coal project directly affects at least 35 square kilometres of this beautiful and historically important residential growth area, and it threatens the water supply on which the whole area - and Sydney - depends. The area has great strategic and amenity value which will increase rapidly into the future, and it is important not to risk destroying it from below. This mine would not be allowed, for example, under a Sydney suburb or under Warragamba Dam. It should not be allowed under the Southern Highlands.

The Hume Coal EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) shows an expected very high impact on the aquifer even if nothing at all goes wrong with the actual operation. That alone should be sufficient evidence for the application to be refused. The fact that operations do not always go entirely to plan means that there is much more potential downside than is shown in the EIS, and that the risks make this project quite simply untenable. The very real risk of unintended consequences is demonstrated by the loss of the Thirlmere lakes to a coal mine which operated with all proper procedures in accordance with its EIS and which was not expected to impact the lakes [2]. Just as the water disappears through the mine's cracks, so does the environmental destruction fall through the regulatory and legislative cracks. There still appears to be no prospect of the Thirlmere mine being halted, the lakes being restored or any compensation being paid to anyone. Protection for the Southern Highlands (and for Sydney's water) from any adverse effects of the Hume Coal project will be just as nonexistent as it is for the Thirlmere Lakes.

Please note that I visited Hume Coal recently and was guided around the project, and I raised this issue there with Hume Coal's representatives. They confirmed that if anyone who suffered a water loss was unable to prove that Hume Coal was at fault then they would be dependent on the company's goodwill. The Thirlmere experience shows just how unwise it can be to rely on goodwill.

According to Hume Coal's EIS, Hume Coal has already secured "*in excess of 60% of the total water licence requirement*" [3]. However, they say that their maximum volume required for licensing is 2,290.5ML/yr whereas SHCAG (Southern Highlands Coal Action Group) estimate [4] the water inflow to the mine at "*between 4GL and 22GL per year*" and that the drawdown of the water table will be around 120 metres; "*This will far exceed the Minimal Harm Criteria of the NSW Government's Aquifer Interference Policy*". They also predict that the drawdown impact will be felt "*over an area of over 150 to 200 square kilometers, reaching well outside the mine licence area*". The document was peer reviewed by University of NSW. I understand that the SHCAG estimates were found to be within conservative bounds by the peer review. The essential fact is that Hume Coal is a long way short of the necessary water licences for the mine, and, given the very limited amount of water available locally, they are unlikely ever to obtain the licences. This makes the risks unacceptably high.

I am not anti-mining, and in particular I am not anti-coal. I appreciate the enormous contribution made by mining to the Australian economy and indirectly to people's lives worldwide. That includes coal mining and the benefits that flow from coal-fired power generation and steel-making. I hope and trust that Australia's mining generally and coal mining in particular will continue to thrive and to deliver their benefits to many future generations. But mines need to be located where water supplies will not be put at risk. The location of this proposed mine makes it a potential disaster.

Yours Sincerely

Mike Jonas
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References:

[1]. Sydney-Canberra Corridor Regional Strategy 2006-2031 :
http://www.wsc.nsw.gov.au/uploads/686/sccrs_2006-2031.pdf

[2]. UNSW Centre for Ecosystem Science, "*Drying of ancient Thirlmere Lakes caused by human activities*" : <https://ecosystem.unsw.edu.au/content/rivers-and-wetlands/wetland-dynamics/thirlmere-lakes> (summary : <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/science-tech/drying-ancient-thirlmere-lakes-caused-human-activities>)

[3] Hume Coal EIS. <http://tinyurl.com/ya85pv79>

[4] SHCAG Hume Project Groundwater Study April 2014
http://www.coalfreesouthernhighlands.com/_literature_195201/Groundwater_Study_-_Synopsis