

DARIA BALL

'Greenacres' 12521 Hume Highway Sutton Forest NSW 2577

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NSW Department of Planning and Environment
Major Project Assessment – Hume Coal Project

Attention: Mr Clay Preshaw

Background

My late husband and I commenced farming in Sutton Forest in 1987 – thirty years ago. Over those years we owned several properties including Comfort Hill, one of the first farms in the area dating back to the 1830s; Carlisle Downs; Hartfield and Wongonbra – all located in Sutton Forest.

Not content to simply farm we operated on the premise that we should improve the land and the environment by undertaking mass tree plantings of over 100,000 trees, pasture improvement and environmental upgrades of any waterways running through our land, particularly Wells Creek, an important tributary to the Wingecarribee River within the Sydney catchment Area.

We experienced every type of weather event including the severe drought in the early 2000s, something that underlined the importance of the water catchment to Sydney and to our farms. Without that aquifer and the bores on our land, we could not have maintained our herd of 500 stud cows plus bulls and calves and the commercial herd.

It's All About the Water

The drought which dragged on over three years illustrated a most important point – while it was possible to truck in hay from as far away as Sought Australia to feed our stud herd, as the dams ran low we relied on our bores to pump drinking water for the cattle. Cows each drink a bath tub of water a day and that's a huge amount of water when one considers the number of cattle bred in the area.

Add to that the fact that without the water in the Southern Highlands Warragamba would not have coped. Goulburn also relied on water sent from our area.

If the Hume Coal mine de-waters the aquifer, we can say goodbye to viable farming in the Southern Highlands as their supposed "make good" proposals are nonsense. There is absolutely no way they could deliver enough water across all the farms affected and the geology of the aquifer means it may never re-charge.

All of us who have ever drilled a bore know the geology very well and it is at odds with the information cited in Hume Coal's EIS. Over time many of us have sought scientific advice about the ecology of the aquifer. I was specifically told over 20 years ago that while there is a huge amount of water in the aquifer, it requires careful handling given the manner in which the coal seam sits within the sandstone and in relation to the aquifer.

In more recent years clear proof came to the fore that illustrated the existing Medway Colliery was de-watering the bores in its vicinity; water was pouring into the mine and the water exiting the mine into the Wingecarribee River was polluted. As the proposed Hume Coal mine is far larger than the Medway Colliery (now closed), it is highly probable that the water loss from the larger mine could be catastrophic for the aquifer.

Contrary Policies

It has always seemed almost schizophrenic to me that on the one hand farmers in our area have always been held to high standards by the Sydney Catchment Authority and the Wingecarribee Shire Council when it comes to water and land management, but contrarily mining has been allowed to degrade the water resources as so amply proven by the Medway Colliery activity. Most farmers are by nature conservationists and therefore are happy to be good custodians of the land on which they farm.

However we find it every confusing when we see so many examples of the manner in which coal mining has been allowed to undo the good environmental work of the agricultural community.

Financial Considerations

The Hume Coal EIS indicates there is very little financial upside for the State of NSW over the life of the mine. However the potential for destruction of the aquifer is a high probability based on all the expert reports I have read. It seems whenever such environmental vandalism occurs, the miners are long gone and the taxpayer ends up footing the bill. Close examples of this are the Thirlmere Lakes and the Cataract River.

There are so many mines in "care and maintenance" mode in NSW and many are for sale, it seems that Hume Coal would have been better served to buy one of these rather than try to persuade the Government to allow them to undertake such a fraught mining programme in a highly sensitive area.

Social Impact

The threat of this mine has had substantial social impacts in the area. Land owners within the lease have been subjected to stressful interaction with Hume Coal, difficult mediations and court actions. The cost of fighting the mine has been a huge financial stress on many people plus the inordinate amount of time expended on the constant focus on details.

Economics

It is clear to me that a negative economic impact has already occurred as a result of the mine proposal. Property sales prices have been depressed with those who have sold often losing money in the transaction. New homes or major renovations have been stalled, meaning an impact on the building industry in the area. Similarly further environmental work on farms has been delayed with major tree planting halted, fence upgrades put off, dam maintenance lapsed etc. All of this has reduced work for trades' people in the Southern Highlands. It is also clear that any mine workers would have to be drawn from outside our area so the supposed uplift in employment is not really there either.

Conclusion

Having waded through the Hume Coal EIS I find their justification to be unimpressive as they rely on such a small amount of testing to make sweeping claims about expected outcomes because a great deal of their explanations seems contradictory.

I implore the NSW Government to do the right thing for the aquifer, the community and for Sydney's water supply, or during the next major drought we will all be in trouble.

Yours sincerely,

Daria V. Ball

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