

My submission on the Hume Coal EIS

I have known “Araluen” and Wells Creek since I was about 18 – and I have just turned 60 – so that makes it 38 years. My parents bought their original holding in about 1976 or 1977. My family – my Mum and Dad and my four siblings used to camp out on the farm, and cook dinner on a campfire made from dead timber fallen from the gum trees on the property. We built all of the fences by hand – I still remember the old Ford Tractor with its post hole digger that we nicknamed “The Widow Maker”! We could not afford fencing contractors, and all of our fences and the cattle yards were built by my parents and their five teenage children. We would ride our horses around the farm during the day and we even built a few cross-country jumps for our horses from fallen trees and rocks on the property – little did we know what “Araluen” would later become famous for.

At the end of 1977, we chose a place for the house and proudly watched it built by our builders, the Zealey Brothers. We then built a post and rails fence – with recycled posts and rails – and planted out the garden and the lawns by hand. We were very proud that the garden was, some years later, opened to the public to raise money for charities.

We subsequently have planted – and this is only an approximate guess – about 4,000 trees around the property. Many, if not all of these trees would likely die if the water table drops significantly, as the Hume Coal EIS states that it will likely do. For the last 40 years my parents have driven tractors, towing water tankers, to water these trees until they can grow independently. We have watered trees directly and even installed dripper lines to get these trees to survive their early days. This was a real labour of love, particularly in the severe doubts that we had in the early eighties, again in the mid- nineties, again in the early naughties, and finally a few years ago. When some trees died, I watched my parents replant, water and nurture the replacement trees. Sometimes it took two or three goes to get these trees going.

It appals me that Hume Coal counts this as just a little “collateral damage”, with minimal mention in its EIS of the effects of lowering the water table. Sorry, Hume Coal – this is the same as a prolonged drought – and you say that it will go on for the commercial life of the mine but will recover over the next few decades after the mine is decommissioned. I don’t think this is good enough.

This mine is not needed. Coal is a dirty, non-renewable energy source, a left over from the industrial revolution. Over the last decade we have become more aware of the global effects of burning fossil fuels and the price that mankind and the environment will pay. And over the last few years the world has made great progress in alternative energy sources – particularly renewable sources such as wind, solar and geothermal, to name just a few. So how does Hume Coal feel for my parents and their hand-nurtured trees? Or anything else that my family has worked for developing our farm?

Hume Coal have carefully bought up a few strategic properties around the mine footprint – but there is no compensation for my parents, who have seen the price of their land drop by about 40% since Hume Coal first proposed their mine. No offer from Hume Coal! (Not that they want to sell their beautiful property!). No compensation for the loss of environment, trees, or groundwater. Nothing but legal bullying for them, singled out with a small number of other property owners for a litigation-filled intimidation, to try to intimidate all the other property owners by example. My parents have spent tens of thousands of dollars of their own money trying to resist the Hume Coal juggernaut. This is not what they deserve in their final years of retirement – after all the effort that they have made to develop “Araluen” and after all their years of contribution to our local rural society, working as a GP and a pharmacist respectively.

But back to my story! In the early 1980s, my parents bought the adjoining holding which stretched up to the Hume Highway. Again, we fenced it with just the labour of the family and the grunt of the old white Ford tractor. Thousands of trees were planted, some in tree guards in paddocks, some in tree lanes along the boundaries and environmentally selected places. Today, when one drives around “Araluen”, it is stunning how many beautiful and mature trees decorate what was forty years ago virtually bare. In the late eighties, we often rode our horses around the big farm, and built more cross-country fences to train our horses over.

By 1991, encouraged by two Australian Equestrian Olympians, we as a family decided that we would run an equestrian event at “Araluen”. We formed a club, “Berrima Horse Trials”, a committee to run the event and held numerous working bees with local volunteers. Suffice it to say that 26 years later, Berrima Horse Trials thrive at “Araluen” – the club hold its two to three events plus various school and Pony Club events each year and is frequently used for training, at no charge by the owners. It is one of the most prestigious events in the country, with many permanent and portable cross country jumps, as well as jumping and dressage arenas. Many thousands of hours of volunteer work and re-invested profits from the club, however, in the judgement of Hume Coal, this did not constitute a significant improvement.

Eventually, however, the NSW Land and Environment Court did recognise the scope of the improvements. Hume Coal, on the other hand, did not give a toss. This is typical of this Korean company’s view of the human element affected by this proposed development. It is just about money, and there is no respect for the locals, their accumulated efforts and assets and the less tangible aspects of life quality. Must the dollar always trump the human being and the quality of our lives?

As a doctor, I am not impressed by either the quality or veracity of Hume Coals scientific statements – for example, they say that all the mine washings will be stored underground and will have no effects on the quality of the subterranean water or the water that will flow into the Sydney Catchment. Blind Freddie could tell you that the capacity of the mine to store water will be grossly inadequate to store both the water pumped out of the mine and the water used to process and wash the coal prior to transport. Likewise, who would believe Hume Coal’s claims that its new extraction method, known as first-workings, is designed to preserve the long-term stability of the overlying strata and landscape above, when it has never been used in Australia before. What if they are wrong, and there is significant subsidence. This would totally ruin the Berrima Horse Trials arenas and cross country tracks.

I am concerned about the coal dust and its effect on the environment, the coal trains and their addition to noise and pollution. I am concerned at the most inappropriate juxtaposition of the mine and the heritage area of Berrima and Sutton Forest. While Hume Coal has spent large sums of money trying to win the hearts and minds of everyone in the district, for example by sponsoring the local darts and tiddly-winks teams, and make promises of huge numbers of jobs both in construction and in running – these claims have been shown in many other mining developments to be vastly inflated.

The bottom line is that no one wants Hume Coal – the immediate locals living on or close to the mine footprint, the residents of the greater Wingecarribee region or the citizens of our planet. Coal is an old dirty and polluting technology and we should not perpetuate the blight of this energy source on this planet or our fields.

Think Global, Act Local!