



17 March 2021

Major Projects  
Department of Planning, Industry and Environment  
NSW Government

DAMS HEG  
c/- 892 Dorset Rd  
Muswellbrook 2333

**Re: Mount Pleasant Optimisation Project**

Dear Sir/Madam,

I would like to lodge an objection to the Mount Pleasant Optimisation Project on behalf of the Denman Aberdeen Muswellbrook Scone Healthy Environment Group.

We are, in the Upper Hunter, deeply traumatised by the cumulative impacts of coal mining and burning. Our health, landscape and wildlife are all being sacrificed for short term economic profits to overseas companies in the name of royalties and local jobs, which are not properly costed against human health and environmental consequences.

We believe approving an open cut mine immediately upwind of the significant regional population of Muswellbrook would seem negligent to objective eyes. The health risks of air pollution have been calculated by epidemiologists the world over. Monitoring by the Upper Hunter Air Quality Network shows that we cannot afford further air pollution in our region. Allowing a doubling of production until 2048 can be expected to seriously exacerbate this problem.

We also seek assurances that signals from Rossgole Tower, to the west of the proposed Mt Pleasant mine expansion, (the main transmission tower for Upper Hunter emergency services, radio & TV) are not blocked by the very high overburden. If calculations show these signals will be interrupted by the height of the overburden, then the situation obviously needs to be remedied, by MACH, before it happens.

It is estimated the Hunter River will initially lose 32 million litres each year. The groundwater impact assessment estimates the cumulative drawdown to be up to 10m near Kayuga. The long-term reduction from base flow into the rivers is predicted to be 40 million litres every year. While this is relatively small volume, in the context of climate change however, it may be a significant long-term loss. This water will no longer be available for irrigation or the environment. Instead of flowing down the river this precious resource will drain into the mine and, after closure, flow into the final void. There the water will evaporate, concentrating dissolved salts and contaminants, forever. The 5km long 500m wide toxic void will, we fear, be a death trap to wildlife that may fall in the steep banked toxic reservoir. It will not be far from the similar but narrower north-south final void of Bengalla.

The eastern spoil pile will, in places, be approximately as high as Mt Pleasant itself and will be visible from Scone. Breaking through the east - west ridge of Castlerock Road significantly impacts the visual amenity of people in Aberdeen and breaks into the Upper Hunter Valley. We find these overburden mountains eyesores, a cause of anxiety, like waiting for something to heal, and unable to fully grasp that it is never going to heal. The deterioration of air quality, its known impact on health, particularly for people with pre-existing conditions, and the destruction of views is likely the cause of the depressed house prices in Muswellbrook.

Also, there are 30 privately owned rural residences or parcels of land with the right to acquisition upon request. There is the flow-on negative impact from depopulating small communities on the social fabric, mental health, services (eg Rural Fire Service), etc on the remnant population.

Indigenous artefacts have been found all over the mine site, evidence of significant occupation. Turning this country over so that it is completely unrecognisable breaks the links of belonging and connection to our origins.

The Upper Hunter has an economic strategy that focusses on agriculture and tourism. Muswellbrook needs investment in economic diversification and further entrenchment of mining obstructs this investment.

This proposal is not merely an extension in time of the previously approved mine: MACH is now proposing to **double its rate** of extraction. Unfortunately, the total emissions from this one project amount to 0.2% (1/500th) of the worlds remaining carbon budget. If warming is to be limited to an already dangerous 1.5<sup>0</sup>C, it is essential for us all that this project and others like it, do not proceed.

Australian woodland ecosystems are collapsing. (<https://theconversation.com/existential-threat-to-our-survival-see-the-19-australian-ecosystems-already-collapsing-154077#:~:text=We%20found%2019%20Australian%20ecosystems,and%20moss%20beds%20in%20Antarctica.>)

The Great Eastern Ranges Initiative identified the Upper Hunter is already a bottleneck in the continuous habitat migration opportunity for species; plant, animal, fungi and microorganisms, as habitat changes with the climate.

The mine site includes two threatened fauna species, the striped legless lizard (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) and the squirrel glider (*Petaurus norfolcensis*). Also on site, the tiger orchid (*Cymbidium canaliculatum*) belongs to the endangered Hunter population.

The threatened ecological community, under the EPBC Act, consists of 3 Plant Community Types (PCT)- Grey box x Whitebox grassy woodland (45Ha), Forest Redgum grassy open forest and White box, Narrow leaved Ironbark and Blakely's Redgum, is found on the site. Biodiversity here needs protection not further incremental cuts.

The offset land is on basalt country mostly west of Merriwa. This is hardly like for like. We take issue with the expressed attitude and assumptions provided in the NSW Biodiversity Offsets Policy for Major Projects, eg

*"For example, if a proponent requires an area of native woodland to be cleared for a development to proceed, another area of similar woodland can be protected and managed for conservation in perpetuity. Over time, the gain in biodiversity achieved by improving the similar area of woodland will counterbalance the biodiversity lost due to the clearing."*

*The policy provides a standard method for assessing impacts of major projects on biodiversity and determining offsetting requirements. This reduces the need for case-by-case negotiations, including debates around the adequacy of assessments. It also provides increased certainty to proponents, allowing offsetting requirements to be known and factored in during the planning phase of a project. <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/research-and-publications/publications-search/nsw-biodiversity-offsets-policy-for-major-projects>*

This policy negates the validity of the concept of biodiversity itself.

In conclusion- What did we start with and what are we leaving our children? Greta Thunberg has broken through the inertia and rhetoric with her clear statements of where we find ourselves, and plainly telling us of our responsibilities to future generations.

We call on the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment to recognise the need for a rapid change in direction and to reject this proposal outright.