Bathurst Community Climate Action Network (BCCAN) Submission

BCCAN background

BCCAN is a network of organisations and individuals working together to promote action on climate change and sustainable and equitable development. BCCAN has approximately 100 members and a mailing list of approximately 200 hundred. The group was registered as an Incorporated Association with the Department of Fair Trading in 2007. Since then, it has been an active participant in public discussions about environmental policy in the Central West of NSW.

We are affiliated to peak organisations the Nature Conservation Council (NCC) of NSW and to the national Climate Action Network Australia (CANA). We are also a member of the regional Central West Environment Council (CWEC).

Our ongoing public profile includes media comment and analysis, an active role in social media and a regular column in Bathurst's local newspaper, the *Western Advocate*. We have also received and acquitted grants from the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, including a research project into Conservation Voltage Reduction (CVR) in 2015-16 and the Spark Tank research project (2017) into community attitudes towards the concept of electric car racing on Mt Panorama.

BCCAN members live not just in Bathurst, but also in and around the Blayney/Kings' Plains area. Some would be personally affected by the proposed gold mine, and all deplore the detrimental effects of the proposed mine on the environmental health of the Central West region of NSW, and the physical and psychological health of its residents.

BCCAN has strong and serious objections to the McPhillamys Gold Project proposal, based on a number of environmental and other grounds.

1. Loss of water in perpetuity in a warmer, drier climate

In a time of critical drought conditions, with 97.2% of NSW in drought, the proposal to permanently plug nine springs that feed the headwaters of the Belubula River, with no proof that this would not impede the flow of the river, must be strenuously resisted. These springs come up and down as nature dictates, particularly in dry times, and cannot be accurately

computer-modelled. Only two main springs would remain that are located lower in the river than the proposed tailings dam. Rain that does fall in the area above the tailings dam, which would previously have fed the headwaters, would instead mostly flow into the tailings dam.

McPhillamys Gold Project also seeks water allocations to draw from the Belubula River below the proposed mine site, which would further reduce the river flow. The intention is also to draw from groundwater via a Water Access Licence, and this would increase after cessation of mining to 200 ML per year.

All demands on water for this mine would reduce water available for food production, a need which will only become more critical as the climate crisis becomes more entrenched.

As the mine pit is planned to go deeper than the river level and the water table, there is potential for the groundwater to be polluted, and perhaps for the river to drain into the pit.

Carcoar Dam, into which the Belubula River flows, is already at a low level, with restricted outflows.

2. Toxic contents of pipeline

Regis Resources McPhillamys Gold Project's history in the Central West has consistently prioritised its demand for a huge volume of water to service the proposed mine over the necessity of water security for the residents and environment of the Central West area.

When Bathurst Regional Council deferred a decision on Regis' request to buy ten Megalitres of treated effluent per day, a volume which would have seriously affected the flow of the Macquarie River, Regis turned to colliery waste, reaching an agreement with Mount Piper to pump between four and five gigalitres of waste water each year (approximately 13 Megalitres per day – Appendix AA – Pipeline Noise) from Lithgow, around 90 kilometres.

This waste, consisting as it does of brine concentrate and heavy metal salts, would be used to lay dust in the mine site, increasing the toxicity of the mine area, and the surrounding areas wherever the wind blows.

As the contents proposed for the pipeline are corrosive, there exists a real danger of breach of the pipeline, and hence contamination of the surrounding area. The pipeline route goes over Cox's River and multiple creeks, and goes under the Macquarie River (Appendix V) – 112 water crossings in all (Appendix AA, p.36). Breach of the pipeline could contaminate several waterways. As Regis has plans to deal with pipeline leaks (Appendix AA), it must be assumed that these are anticipated.

The pumping station near Bathurst Bike Park would vent toxic gases into the air near facilities that are designed for healthy recreation.

https://www.centralwesterndaily.com.au/story/5583195/our-say-we-cant-blame-them-for-being-dam-worried-about-blayneys-gold-mine/

3. Dangers of tailings dam and storage dams

The siting of the tailings dam directly over the headwaters of the Belubula River is a cause for strong concern. Failure of the tailings dam, either for geological reasons or because of overflow during heavy rain, would inevitably allow cyanide and heavy metal salts to flow into the Belubula River, and hence to the Carcoar Dam and Lachlan River, with severe consequences for fish life, farming operations, wildlife, and tourism and recreation downstream.

The tailings dam wall is designed to seep, so these heavy metal salts will not be contained to the tailings dam.

Newcrest Mine's tailings dam at nearby Cadia cracked and "slumped" on March 9, 2018, partly because geological conditions did not provide the expected appropriate base for the type of construction used.

Regis has a history of tailings dam failure in Western Australia, and tailings dams are problematic throughout Australia.

https://thewest.com.au/news/wa/regis-laments-mine-flooding-ng-ya-366220?fbclid=IwAR3KCw7VKkN450BeWBdGMNik6frMx-kir8hQURHfvKJLzc3rg1Qpfa9rQRI

https://www.australianmining.com.au/news/regis-resources-suspends-operations-as-mines-flood/

https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2019-06-20/tailings-dam-audit-finds-high-failure-risks-across-australia/11223510

Storage dams to contain the brine from the pipeline would not be lined, and one would be located very close to the Belubula River, increasing the risk of contamination of the river.

4. Deleterious effects on Agriculture

The proposed mine would be located on prime grazing land, which would be lost to production for generations.

Apiarists would be particularly affected by approval of the mine proposal, again due to dust and heavy metal contamination of flowers and water needed by the bees, as well as destruction of adjacent forests. A well-respected and important local honey and queen bee producing business could be lost if mining approval were to proceed, with concomitant loss of many jobs.

https://www.centralwesterndaily.com.au/story/6311088/where-does-agriculture-fit-in-apiarists-furious-over-proposed-gold-mine/?fbclid=IwAR3w7v2tHn1xDltmJLFgu2fFuUl-algTVaNlS1diWTH_OjOkM7NMALrb0-o

The enormous carbon emissions from the energy use in the McPhillamys Gold Project would exacerbate the risks of fires and droughts and seasonal changes impacting on agriculture not only in the local environment but globally. In a time when weather events have become more extreme, there is little recognition of the dangers of this were the project to proceed. The

sustainable future of Agriculture on and around this site would be risked just to produce a relatively small volume of low-grade gold.

5. **Effects on native animal habitats**

The proposed mine site and areas directly surrounding it are home to endangered squirrel gliders. Critical foraging trees for the koala population would be destroyed. These animals would also be badly affected by the noise and dust created by blasting and other mine operations, as well as the night-time lighting, and are unlikely to be able to find new habitat. High altitude yellow box trees, perhaps 200 years old, are marked for destruction.

6. **Inadequate remediation**

Regis states that disturbed land areas would be remediated "as far as practicable". The pit void, around one kilometre in diameter and 460 metres deep, would remain, and would not be managed. The waste rock piled up into an "amenity bund" is projected by Regis to be covered in grass within four years, which is unlikely at best in drought conditions. The tailings dam would be capped, and grazing is stated as an option for use, although not cropping or forestry, as the cap may be pierced by these uses. In Appendix U #4 (p.44), the repurposing of mine infrastructure for industrial use is considered, which is an inappropriate use for what should remain grazing land.

7. **Effects on the human population**

The mine is planned to operate 24 hours of every day. This would have a huge impact on existing residents, many of whom are living within one to two kilometres of the mine site. Multiple factors would combine to affect the physical and mental health of the residents.

Noise pollution would be constant, with blasting planned to occur every day at any time in a 12-hour period, as well as the sound of the processing of the extracted ore, and frequent truck movements.

The light pollution from the continuous night-time lighting would affect the sleep of residents, contributing to a number of health problems, including obesity and mental health. Residents have a right to the peaceful enjoyment of their homes.

The air quality of a large area around the mine site would be adversely affected. There are many houses with multiple residents directly across the Mid-Western Highway from the mine site. Regis' best estimate, as shown in their EIS map, indicates that these houses would be subject to air pollution even on days of good weather, so on days of less favourable weather, the pollution could reasonably be expected to be higher. Diesel fumes from trucks and machinery would add to this.

At the time of writing, the weather forecast for the next day was for winds of 35 to 50 km/hr in the area of Blayney. If control of dust were inadequate, as it is at the nearby Cadia mine on

occasions, the residents, their homes, their farm and domestic animals and their gardens would be subject to toxic winds and dust residue.

Water supplies for local residents would also be contaminated, as toxic dust would wash off roofs into drinking water tanks. Those residents attempting to live an organic lifestyle would have that possibility destroyed.

The visual amenity of the area would be severely impacted, as the rural area that people chose to live in would become an industrial site.

Current anecdotal reports are that Regis is unwilling to buy affected properties or otherwise compensate the landholders for the inevitable contamination of their land which would prevent its current use.

Conclusion

Concerns for water loss and potential toxicity alone would be sufficient to query the wisdom of allowing this proposal to proceed. It is our contention that the projected mine is far too close to a population centre to be a reasonable proposition. There would be little economic benefit to the Blayney area or NSW, with profits mostly being returned to overseas investors, and the gold potentially ending up in vaults overseas with no practical use. Any benefit to Blayney or NSW would be insufficient to justify the permanent degradation of valuable grazing land and the burying of the headwaters of a river under a toxic tailings dam. The multiple impacts on residents, wildlife and agriculture all add to the reasons for which BCCAN strenuously objects to this proposal.

Margaret Sewell

Honorary Secretary BCCAN