

Planning Assessment Commission Review Wilpinjong Extension Project RO39-16

Submission of Objection

The following are my personal views. I object to the approval of further expansion of coal mining in Wollar area. This is a high risk strategy against the wishes and interest of the majority. Disregarding the long term interests and health of rural communities such as Wollar can only weaken overall capacity to deal with wildfires.

I have been an active firefighter in the Ulan / Wollar area since the 1980s. In the early 2000s, as a direct result of approved mining expansions, the sudden closure of Ulan brigade was a traumatic event, putting the area's firefighting capacity in disarray. Demoralisation and uncertainty was given another boost a few years later when Wollar Brigade also was closed due to depopulation from ongoing mining expansions. Now I am deputy captain and training officer in Cooks Gap RFB and determined to avoid Cooks Gap ever going the same way as Ulan and Wollar. In recent years Cooks Gap Brigade has had little choice but adapt to a greatly expanded area of responsibility. The area that in practice now is covered by the one remaining volunteer brigade stretches from halfway to Gulgong across to the Golden highway and through to beyond Bylong and across to Munghorn Gap. This same area in the early 2000s was looked after by four brigades: Ulan, Cooks Gap, Wollar and Bylong.

Before the approval of multiple mining proposals and expansions in the Ulan/Wollar/Bylong area, responsibility was shared between four Brigade Captains and supported by four lots of senior deputies, deputies, executive, administrative and fundraising officers and well over a hundred active firefighters. Now we have one captain, one senior deputy, one group of field officers, one executive and around 40 active firefighters - all trying to juggle the competing demands of work, family and being an active volunteer (I spend between 10 and 20 hours a week unpaid work on fire brigade matters and there are those who put in more than that). Also stationed throughout the area were four Category 1 fire vehicles (now there is one) at least seven or eight category 7 fire vehicles (Cooks Gap has three) and more than eight or ten category 9 fire vehicles (Cooks Gap has two cat 9s). The abrupt closures of Ulan and Wollar Brigades and withering away of Bylong happened after critical numbers of brigade members were forced out of the area and subsequent demoralisation and lack of engagement of many remaining.

To be clear, this hollowing out of firefighting capacity was not the result of normal attrition. These detrimental changes happened suddenly over the last ten years or so and were the direct result of the impacts of 24 hour/ 7 days a week mining practices such as noise and dust, along with broad scale acquisition of properties.

As a field officer I have witnessed some of the problems that have arisen from these new circumstances. For example, if all of our vehicles are responding to an incident on the Bylong Road or Barrigan Road it will take an hour or longer to return and defend households along Ridge Road or Yarrawonga Road. That well populated area has been listed as vulnerable to wildfires, but is essentially unprotected for the time firefighting units are away unless units can be drawn in from other areas. Changed circumstances due to the approved expansion of mining have saddled the last remaining rural fire brigade with a threefold expansion of area and have created this dilemma. How far from home is it safe to ask people to go on a bad fire day, given our policy to hit all fires as hard and fast as possible? If a second or third incident were to occur at the same time back home (not unusual after a lightning storm) how long will units take to return? This has potential to put the safety of firefighters and protection of life and property in jeopardy. At the very least potential divisiveness and increasing pressure on volunteer group captains, captains and field officers and Mudgee Fire Control responsible for managing the increased risk. An increased risk caused by approving multiple mining expansions in our area.

After ten or twelve years of mining expansions, the one remaining active rural fire brigade covering what is now a threefold expanded area has greatly expanded assets to protect as well, with an array of associated new support infrastructure for the three ever-expanding mines. This is in a wider context of increasing length of fire seasons and severity of fire danger weather due to human induced climate change now well documented. Also there is a state context of Government withdrawal from non-urban areas. For example responsibilities formerly covered by Police Officers at motor vehicle crashes are being increasingly devolved onto volunteers of Rural Fire Brigades along with increased calls to assist Ambulance Officers. This means ever increasing demands on volunteers' time and no let up when it rains, there may be fewer fires in the wet but there can be motor vehicle accidents or medical emergencies, so you are still on call. As a self-employed person, time spent as a volunteer is at the expense of my income earning work and/or my partner has to cover for me.

Last year following the amalgamation of the remaining volunteers of Wollar with Cooks Gap Brigade it looked like the larger fire vehicle of the last two remaining fire vehicles based at Wollar would have no one qualified to drive the vehicle. I was warned that the loss of 7 Bravo from the Wollar shed was imminent. This meant that soon there would be no vehicle capable of dealing with a structure fire based closer than 37 kilometers away from the village. Also this would have signalled an effective end to any chance of rebuilding the numbers of volunteers responding to Wollar fire shed. We appealed to remaining Wollar area locals and miners and held a special meeting. As a result of this and a great deal of work by a number of Cooks Gap Brigade members and fully supported by Mudgee FCC, four new firefighters gained their basic firefighter qualifications and one reserve member became active, including two licensed to drive 7B. This was followed more recently by six newly qualified members, five of whom work at Wilpinjong CM, it remains to be seen how active they are able to become. Also the kitchen, toilet and water facilities at Wollar fire shed 3 have been upgraded.

Without further shocks, the community of Wollar retains the possibility to one day rebuild their rural fire brigade and for the time being I believe a good working relationship has been established with Wilpinjong CM. However this is not enough for the longer term. Fundamental problems arising from having to cover a vast area with greatly reduced resources remain unaltered. The only practicable way to relieve the pressure on Cooks Gap Brigade is to re-establish an effective volunteer fire brigade based at Wollar. This can never be possible without the renewal of a strong community at Wollar. It is pointless to delude ourselves that security against wildfires in the Cooks Gap/Ulan/Wollar/Bylong area will be achieved by asking Wilpinjong CM or the other mines to do more. Wilpinjong CM are already doing all that could reasonably be asked of a company whose main task after all, is to dig coal - not form communities. The establishment into the future of a resilient volunteer firefighting capability in the Ulan/Wollar/Bylong area is dependent on the Wollar community not being further threatened by approvals of mining expansions close to the village.

Recommendation:

Recent news that CSIRO has just signed a deal with Chinese company Thermal Focus to make, sell and install CSIRO patented solar thermal generation technology in China rather than in Australia shows a way forward for the Ulan/Wollar /Cooks Gap & Bylong area. As a byproduct of the last few decades of industrialisation our area has established an assembly of high value, publicly underwritten assets - access to the power grid, good water resources, road and rail networks and a multi skilled trained workforce. Sadly this unique grouping of assets with potential for establishment of a multiplicity of sustainable enterprises on former mine sites will soon be wasted if these assets remain linked to only one industry. Coal mining is an old industry with a strictly limited future. It cannot compete with new technologies and is in structural decline. Approval of yet another risky and destructive expansion of mining closer to Wollar will be an opportunity missed. Rather we should be embracing the future such as the CSIRO solar thermal power generation and storage.

Yours sincerely

Colin Imrie.

A black rectangular redaction box covering the signature of Colin Imrie.

20 November 2016