



MINE EXPANSION BLOCKED BY COMMISSION OVER SIGNIFICANT CATCHMENT CONCERNS

5 February 2021

The state's Independent Planning Commission has blocked expansion plans for a major coal mine, near Wollongong, finding the proposed mine design risks long-term and irreversible damage to Greater Sydney and the Illawarra's drinking water catchment.

South32 Limited (the Applicant) had sought planning approval to extend the life of its Dendrobium mine until the end of 2048 and extract an additional 78-million tonnes of run-of-mine coal from two new areas near Avon and Cordeaux Dams. Most of that coal would be used in steelmaking here and overseas.

Significant concerns have been raised about the proposed mine design, subsidence, ground and surface water impacts, biodiversity and upland swamps, Aboriginal cultural heritage and greenhouse gas emissions.

A whole-of-government assessment by the Department of Planning, Industry & Environment concluded the \$956-million Dendrobium Extension Project was "approvable", finding its benefits "significantly outweigh its residual costs, and that it is in the public interest".

However, the Commission has today (Friday 5 February 2021) determined to refuse the state significant development application, finding the risks of adverse impacts on the environment are high, and that those impacts are not appropriately manageable and are likely to be irreversible.

"[A]fter careful examination of all the evidence and weighing all relevant considerations, the Commission has found that the longwall mine design put forward by South32 does not achieve a balance between maximising the recovery of a coal resource of State significance and managing, minimising or mitigating the impacts on the water resources and biodiversity and other environmental values of the Metropolitan Special Area," the Commission's Statement of Reasons for Decision reads.

"[T]he level of risk posed by the Project has not been properly quantified and based on the potential for long-term and irreversible impacts -- particularly on the integrity of a vital drinking water source for the Macarthur and Illawarra regions, the Wollondilly Shire and Metropolitan Sydney -- it is not in the public interest."

The Commission noted the Applicant had not appropriately addressed concerns in relation to the proposed mine design.

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“The Applicant was aware of concerns raised by WaterNSW and others regarding its mine design and the associated impacts. The Applicant has made minor amendments; however, the impacts remain significant,” it stated. “The Commission notes the Applicant has offered mitigation measures for remediation of selected key stream features, financial offsets for water losses and water quality impacts and an upland swamp offset site; however, a number of these measures have not been considered acceptable by the responsible Statutory agencies.”

The Commission is the independent consent authority for this state significant development application because the Department received more than 50 ‘unique’ public objections during exhibition of the Environmental Impact Statement.

Chair of the Commission, Professor Mary O’Kane AC, appointed Commissioners Steve O’Connor (Panel Chair) and John Hann to determine the Application.

As part of their decision-making process Commissioners O’Connor and Hann met with the Applicant, the Department, Wollondilly and Wingecarribee Shire Councils, WaterNSW and the Independent Advisory Panel for Underground Mining and inspected the site and surrounding area. They also hosted a virtual public hearing to listen to the community’s views as requested by the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces.

The Commission’s Statement of Reasons for Decision can be found here:

<https://www.ipcn.nsw.gov.au/projects/2020/10/dendrobium-extension-project-ssd-8194>

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