**Written submission to Vickery Mine Extension IPC**

Following my online verbal submission last Friday and having listened intently to submissions over the two days I reiterate my objections to the Vickery mine extension proposal and expand on the need to make decisions for the long term intergenerational equity, sustainability, the water, land, and environment of this area and the urgency of action for the climate emergency facing the planet which calls us all to take responsibility.

As I mentioned previously the letter by Pope Francis *Laudato Si* reminds us all that our primary task is to care for the earth our common home. <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> .

The current Covid pandemic is an opportunity to plan for the future, we must not return to the past. It is clear that carbon emissions must be cut rapidly to meet the Paris agreement targets. Coal is the heaviest carbon polluting fuel and already in decline as countries cut their carbon emissions and expand renewable energy sources. Companies and individuals are divesting from fossil fuels and all the big coal companies are under shareholder and investor pressure to quit coal - as I write the second largest super fund *First State Super* has announced it is divesting from coal! Back in 2018 Rio Tinto was the first to sell its last coal mines, Anglo American and BHP are increasingly admitting the dangers of climate change and that coal could be phased out sooner than expected. In 2020 the new BHP CEO speaks of the need to move from coal to mining minerals needed by renewable energy and manufacturing industries. Companies worldwide are recognising the value of improving their environmental record and their social responsibility in support the Paris agreement.

A further adverse indicator is the >70% drop in the Whitehaven ASX share price in the last two years. Whitehaven itself clearly recognising that coal is in decline has more than doubled the proposed extraction rate for the Vickery extension and reduced the life of the mine before it becomes a stranded asset. Recent coal price predictions by the World Bank and KPMG indicate that the Vickery extension would be a loss making venture.

The rich fertile land, river systems, flood plains, forest, environment and biodiversity and around Gunnedah and Boggabri have developed over millennia. As I said in my presentation we hold this sacred land in trust for present and future generations. It is immoral and inequitable for our generation, who now know the serious effects of climate change, to continue mining coal and adding to carbon pollution causing irredeemable harm for future generations here and around the world.

One of the greatest local concerns in NW NSW is water, especially after experiencing searing drought and witnessing water being used to wash coal whilst their farms were suffering and Walgett was without water. How can this be allowed? Where are our priorities? How could we allow even more water to be taken from the system to wash coal? We now understand that coal is a dirty polluting resource for which there are cheaper more efficient replacements available now. And sadly, even the copious use of water does not mitigate the shocking air polluting dust produced by the mines. People, properties crops and health suffer. Purchase of valuable water licenses at vastly increased prices by Whitehaven has greatly upset locals as farmers are priced out of the market. Food is essential, coal is polluting!

During the hearing there were many questions about damage to and interruption of water flows on which surrounding land is dependent. Threats from mining already experienced were described including aquifer, creek and river pollution, a dam breach and drawdown of ground water affecting essential local bores. The Namoi river is a tributary of the Murray Darling river system. Taking water from or polluting the Namoi causes increased shortage and damage downstream too.

Important questions also remain regarding the necessity for and function of a final void. Such serious matters again highlight the necessity to care for the land and the important consideration of intergenerational equity. The serious disruption to the existing landforms by more open cut mining must be refused.

It is indisputable that water is the most basic need of all living things and must not be compromised yet Whitehaven Vickery extension infrastructure is positioned as close as 400 metres from the Namoi river with settling ponds on the flood plain. Plans include construction of rail and bridge infrastructure on the flood plain risking further damage to water flows and creating a visual eyesore.

The many stories of the deleterious effects of ten years of open cut coal mining and the frequent breaches of conditions further damaging the lives of local residents call into question approval of yet another mine in the area. Clearly the conditions placed on the existing mines have not been effective. The mining companies appear to please themselves. For approval of the Vickery extension the Planning Department report lists many pages of conditions. It must be noted that Whitehaven does not have a reliable track record. Based on previous experience it is likely these numerous conditions will not be upheld. As recently as last week during the online public hearing Whitehaven were again referred to the land and environment court for water theft over several years. Can we trust this company? Conditions are only as good as the independent monitoring and enforcement. As pointed out by one presenter in the online hearing, abattoirs are required to have compliance monitors permanently on site, whereas coal is hardly monitored. Setting conditions on mining approvals without insisting on and providing sufficient effective independent monitoring is simply irresponsible. Leaving monitoring up to the mine companies is akin to leaving the fox in control of the hen house.

And the outcome of inadequate monitoring is environmental damage, further biodiversity loss, land and water pollution and water theft none of which can be reversed. The recent push by governments to cut red and green tape exacerbates the situation. A justifiable community outcry was caused by Whitehaven’s illegal building of water pipelines without licenses worsening water constraints and increasing the extent and area of hydrological drawdown. The planning department response was to issue licenses retrospectively instead of penalising this illegal activity. Water is critical and its preservation is of the highest priority to the local community.

Yes we also heard about the jobs coal has provided in the past and how it helped local businesses and has given philanthropic help to some community organisations. But we also heard about Whitehaven’s poor communication, dictatorial behaviour and lack of respect for local concerns. The company now owns local land almost the size of Singapore. They have taken away the livelihoods and family future of at least 90 local farmers and their employees leading to loss of agricultural services and decimation of the Boggabri local community. It is clear from the Narrabri council and many locals and farmers that the Vickery mine extension does not have social license in the community and is not in the public interest.

Despite the increasing concerns over diminishing Koala populations, biodiversity losses and several threatened species in the area, Whitehaven has no existing management plans and offsets have not been identified or purchased. The recent report detailing threats to Koalas’ continued existence is a wake up call warning us to urgently protect and preserve ecosystems and the environment.

The number of new jobs stated in Whitehaven’s Vickery proposal are in excess of present employment levels in local mines. Coal mining jobs are not sustainable and are short term. Improved mining techniques and automation are constantly being introduced to maximise profits for company and shareholders. The already short life of the Vickery extension has now been reduced to 25 years and may well reduce further. And where does the bulk of the profit go? And where does the coal go? Even the royalties to state governments will not cover the irreversible damage to land and water in rural and regional areas. Mining companies rarely make a sustainable job of rehabilitation. Millennia old landscapes can never be recovered after open cut mining.

We have heard too many boom and bust stories of once thriving rural and agricultural towns and villages being ruined by coal and coal seam gas mining. House price rises cut out local buyers, jobs in coal mines drain workers from local businesses leading to closures, further job losses and loss of amenity. And when the mines close, sometimes with little notice, the towns can then be left without services, sometimes almost derelict surrounded by depleted land and water supplies polluted or drained.

With the increasing automation lauded by Whitehaven to its shareholders and the uncertain future of coal, now is the time put all our energy and support into creating lifegiving, sustainable, healthy jobs for this region. Jobs that will not risk wasting and polluting the vital water and land resources of this important agricultural area, the food bowl for NSW. Our first priority must be to preserve and nurture the fertile land and water to withstand the mounting pressures of rising temperatures and increasingly dangerous weather events such as the horrendous bush fires experienced last summer as the climate changes.

With the exit of coal looming, Whitehaven should be required to concentrate on increasing and further developing a skilled rehabilitation workforce rather than opening a new mine and creating more short term rail infrastructure in the Gunnedah Boggabri area. They must train and upskill teams to lead the essential rehabilitation. This could be accomplished by accelerating completion of Rockglen and Sunnyside mine rehabilitation. The skilled workforce would then be available to rehabilitate the other Whitehaven mines as they are phased out. Top priority should be given to repairing the land already ravaged by open cut mines not allowing more moon landscapes to be created. Rehabilitation is what this area needs. The good relationship with local Aboriginal groups and training and job opportunities provided in the mines could be easily transferred to the rehabilitation operations. Local businesses could also transition to supply and maintenance of rehabilitation equipment. Effective rehabilitation is essential work providing ongoing skills. Reafforestation of the Maules Creek mine area is much needed. Forests sequester carbon and help the water cycle. A major concern is that companies are known to exit mining without carrying out the agreed rehabilitation, leaving toxic final voids without adequate funds for remediation. Citizens are then left to pay the price. Rehabilitation should be mandated to occur throughout the mining process and sufficient regular levy paid and monitoring carried out to ensure the job is done properly. Cleaning up the properties that are suffering from the dust and air pollution should also be done by the mining company.

Now is the time for serious creative and visionary thinking. The NSW government’s creation of renewable energy hubs is an excellent start. Another major need as the climate warms is retrofitting of housing with insulation to minimise the use of energy for heating and cooling. Local business could provide these services. Addition of solar panels assists rural properties to lower their energy consumption and improve quality of life as well as providing jobs. Planting trees in gardens and street trees n towns and villages provides welcome shading and considerably lower temperatures for buildings, shops, patrons and houses.

The need for jobs in the post Covid Crisis recovery has produced many other excellent, exciting ideas and online seminars citing job opportunities. For instance the **‘*Stimulus Summit – A renewables led economic recovery’***was *a whole day online conference which brought together leaders in business, civil society, policy makers and academia to provide a significant contribution to public debate on government stimulus packages and climate change action* <https://www.smartenergy.org.au/a-renewables-led-economic-recovery>

A recent report from the Climate council ***Primed for Action*** <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/report-primed-for-action.pdf>

And the recently released Beyond Zero Emissions ***Million Jobs Plan*** <https://bze.org.au/the-million-jobs-plan/> provide lots more ideas for the future that the DPIE could be developing.

At this time, in the light of so much evidence to the contrary, it is difficult to understand why the Vickery Mine Extension project was marked for approval by the DPIE.

I therefore ask the Commission to remind the NSW Government that so many of the submissions have been concerned about the lack of social license, serious current and intergenerational inequity regarding care for land and water in this agricultural community and the overwhelming number of objections around the need to cut carbon pollution to meet Paris agreement targets. The government responsibility now is to reject this and all new fossil projects, plan for speedy rehabilitation and retirement of currently operating coal mines and give priority to supporting the many forward looking opportunities for a low carbon future in a rapidly warming climate.

Refusing approval for the Vickery Extension project is the only option now.

Thank you

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