

Media Release

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Rocky Hill PAC: Protect health with a coal free buffer zone, says Lock the Gate

The national Lock the Gate Alliance is presenting at the Rocky Hill Planning Assessment Commission public meeting in Gloucester this morning, calling for new state laws to put a 10km coal free buffer zone around NSW towns and villages.

“We need the NSW Government to get serious about protecting communities from open cut coal mines and to stop risking resident’s health,” said Naomi Hogan from Lock the Gate Alliance.

“Health professionals are clearly stating the detailed evidence that the health risks of open cut coal mines are serious and should be avoided.


“Open cut coal mines expose nearby residents to poor air quality, toxic fumes from blast plumes, overburden fire risk, light and noise pollution.

“It is critical that the NSW Government takes action to install new state laws to put a 10km coal free buffer zone around NSW towns and villages, to take the protection of residents’ health seriously.

The NSW Government has recently identified the risks to the community and environment from the Rocky Hill Coal proposal as “too great” and recommended refusal due to the proximity of this coal mine to the local town.

“The communities of Gloucester have dealt with the shadow of this inappropriate coal mine for over five long years. Yet all the heartache and stress of this coal mine could have been avoided with a clear buffer zone that protected the town from the outset.

“It is incumbent on the NSW Government and all future political candidates to protect the health of residents. We need action to put a 10km buffer around rural towns to avoid these stressful and unnecessary mine clashes,” she said.

Contact: Naomi Hogan, Lock the Gate Alliance, 

“The coal mine within 5 kilometres of a rural village is not appropriate.

Naomi Hogan, appearing for the Lock the Gate Alliance

Acknowledge the Biripi and Worimi people of this region and pay respects to their elders, and those that have looked after this place for thousands of years, and acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the room.

Lock the Gate Alliance is a national grassroots organisation made up of thousands of individuals and over 250 local groups who are concerned about unsafe or inappropriate mining. The mission of the Lock the Gate Alliance is to protect Australia's agricultural, environmental, and cultural resources from inappropriate mining and to educate and empower all Australians to demand sustainable solutions to food and energy production. Lock the Gate Alliance is committed to advocating for environmental and community health, and the productivity of local economies.

I am also a landholder in this region, a few valleys across, Gloucester is our local, a place that one day I hope to contribute sales of fresh produce, and bring kids down to join in the local community events. I have a strong personal interest in appearing here today to ensure that not only the perspectives of our vast and broad LTG network can be heard by the PAC, but also that I might have my say, as someone who cares deeply about the future of this place and who wants to contribute to the future for this region.

The Rocky Hill mine proposal is simply too close to Gloucester, and it's a certainty that the mine would negatively impact on the quiet rural ambience that is the foundation of the local tourism industry. It is unacceptable to allow the mine project – which promises a peak of just 110 jobs over a period of less than two decades – to threaten the local tourism industry which employs twice as many people in a permanent industry with long-term growth potential.

Lock the Gate argues that the NSW Government should have protected this community years ago, by putting strict buffer zones around community living areas and drinking water supplies. We need to prevent inappropriate proposals that cause undue stress on communities. I urge the PAC and all future forms of assessment and independent planners in NSW not put local community through the turmoil of having to defend their homes, their health and their thriving local industries in food production and tourism. Strict 10 km buffer zones around rural towns and villages to protect families from such inappropriate mining developments must be put into law.

With regards to the health impacts of the Rocky Hill project from coal dust, I note that in its submission to the original EIS, NSW Government agency Hunter New England Population Health raised doubts about the proponent's promise to achieve 90% suppression of dust

The coal expansion that has taken place in NSW since 2012 is larger than the new supply that would be brought on by Adani's Carmichael coal mine in Central Queensland, which is proposed to begin at 25 million tonnes per annum.

In the Hunter, cumulative impacts on biodiversity, water, cultural heritage and air quality are occurring.

The project-by-project assessment process in NSW is failing to account for and prevent these cumulative impacts.

An estimated 70,000ha of the Hunter Valley is under threat from expanded mining, including areas currently occupied by horse breeding and wine-tourism, and around 16% of the fertile Valley floor is already covered by open-cut mines.

It's been estimated that the area of actual pits in the Hunter is 148 km².

Recent air quality in the central part of the Hunter, where coal mining is most intense has been breaching national and state standards. From July to October, there were 37 instances of daily average readings of PM 10 exceeding the 50 micrograms per cubic metre protection measure.

Promised reforms to protect agricultural lands and important water resources from mining have not been delivered. The exclusion zones for critical industry clusters and residential areas do not apply to coal, and other agricultural lands have no exclusion at all.

There is no statutory buffer to protect rivers and creeks, drinking water catchments or important groundwater recharge zones. There are open cut pits just 200m from the Hunter River.

A Mid Hunter Groundwater Study by DPI Water estimated that 977km² of the Hunter Valley could potential be experiencing groundwater drawdown of 2 metres or more. Of this, 123km² overlaps with highly productive alluvial water sources.

Vast improvements are needed across the board in NSW.

But what about the coal miners, don't their jobs count too? This is the argument currently being slung at ~~mostly~~ agricultural communities across Australia that are trying to prevent coal mines from impacting their land, health and water. This is despite the fact that it is actually the coal mining companies that are working hardest to slash jobs and cut costs.

from the mine's haul roads. The submission's author, Dr Craig Dalton, called this a "theoretical" assumption and cited a NSW EPA commissioned report ("the Katestone report") on world's best practice dust suppression which found real-world maximum efficiencies range between 50-70%. Dr Dalton generously suggested that the proponent should assume haul road dust suppression efficiency of 75% or 80% to provide a more "plausible" estimate of the actual PM10 emissions from the mine.

In its Response to Submissions the proponent disregards this advice and again restates the theory behind the 90% dust suppression goal. In the latest Amended EIS, the matter is not mentioned. It is unclear to us from the documentation whether this dubious methodology has now been dropped, and a more realistic approach taken in the modelling of particulate emissions. Nevertheless, we submit that the estimates for PM10 emissions in particular are unreliable and almost certainly underestimated. And that there are too many people who will be impacted by the dangerous coal dust.

Experience with other coal mine projects in the Hunter Valley and elsewhere in NSW is that the actual noise, plus the dust and blasting pollution impacts from the operating mine exceed those that were modelled by the proponent when seeking approval. Also, it is the lived experience of many that the approval conditions are never final.

Companies continually seek, and are granted modifications to their initial approvals, including modifying operating hours, mining rates, the mine area footprint, and the life of the mine itself. In reality, the final mining project usually bears little resemblance to the original project approved, based on restrictions and concessions that will not be maintained.

What else can we measure from communities where they have allowed open cut coal mines to proceed? → cast our attention to the Hunter Valley, & what we can learn.

Communities surrounding mines in the Hunter are reporting and experiencing imbalance, unfair and poor process and the degradation of matters of public interest, particularly air quality.

This has been caused by a dramatic increase in mining activity in the last five years. Between 2010 and 2015, actual coal production volumes in NSW increased by 34 million tonnes, or more than 20%.

At the same time, mines were put into care and maintenance, or had their labour force severely reduced, actual royalties declined and employment fell from 18,000 to 12,000. The mines are digging bigger and bigger holes, and employing less and less people.

Lock the Gate Alliance is committed to making just and fair transitions more than just a slogan. We don't advocate for a shut-down of the Hunter coal industry, nor do we adopt the position that there should be no expansion of coal mining at all. We recognise the need for policies and resources that drive a genuine people-centred transition in coal communities.

People in coal affected communities in the Hunter understand the need to move on.

For example

NSW Government agencies and Hunter Councils have joined with business to adopt a Upper Hunter Economic Diversification Project Action Plan, recognising that the region is vulnerable to global shocks and that mining hampers access to land, water and labour for other industries.

At the grassroots level, Lock the Gate and dozens of local volunteers have been door-knocking across Muswellbrook in the Hunter. We've interviewed 700 people and asked the question:

"Do we need a plan for a post-coal economy in the Hunter?"

So far, nine out of ten people in Muswellbrook think we do.

Here in Gloucester, we can leap frog that process. There is already a thriving town, with opportunities for diverse and increasing employment.

Gloucester deserves the benefit of the detailed information before us and lessons from nearby. The community here has spoken clearly and with well researched evidence on health and noise impacts, water and tourism risks.

This Rocky Hill mine proposal itself has already taken such a toll and so much time out of people's lives, people that have so much to offer their community. I truly trust that the evidence you've heard in these two days, in addition to the recommendation from the Department of to reject the mine, can help this community move on.

It should no longer be satisfactory to put every other industry at risk for a coal mine.

I'm hopeful and positive about the future of this region and for NSW. I urge a common sense rejection of the Rocky Hill mine by this PAC.

A mine rejection could herald a new phase for NSW, where we start to finally realise there are often more jobs and more positive economic activity when big coal mining projects are kept at bay.

It's an exciting time for Gloucester, because with the town protected from coal dust, noise and pollution, the town can get on and keep building its positive sustainable job creation in tourism and food.

I'm personally excited to invest in this community knowing that a wise decision from this Planning Process will mean it's not going to be covered in coal dust, that kids won't be getting sick from mine blasting.

I would like to finish by reiterating a call to you as the Planning Assessment Commission to consider recommending new state laws to put a 10km coal free buffer zone around NSW towns and villages.

We need the NSW Government to get serious about protecting communities from open cut coal mines and to stop risking residents' health.

The communities of Gloucester have dealt with the shadow of this inappropriate coal mine for too long already. Yet all the heartache and stress of this coal mine could have been avoided with a clear buffer zone that protected the town from the outset.

We need action to put a 10km buffer around rural towns to avoid these stressful and unnecessary mine clashes.

Thank you