

Submission from Rebecca Albury, Bulli 2516

Independent Planning Commission, NSW

I object to the Wollongong Coal Ltd's Russell Vale Revised Underground Expansion Project (Major Project 09-0013)

A Bit of Personal Background

I am a resident of Bulli and have worked and lived in the Illawarra since 1984 when I was offered a job at the University of Wollongong as a lecturer in Sociology. I taught social sciences and social policy until I retired at the beginning of 2011. I am the great granddaughter of underground mine workers in West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Both men died early as a result of doing their jobs - one in a mine collapse and the other from Black Lung. They would have been working in the years after the Bulli mine was first established in 1887. The families held the men in high regard but none of the sons followed them into the pits, all of their children except one, grandchildren and great grandchildren finished high school and many have now finished higher educations. One son of the man who died of Black Lung graduated from university as a mining engineer. I tell this story to demonstrate that mine workers can be honoured, even if we close the coal mines in the catchment.

I am concerned about the impact of planned expansion on the local environment and population. When I first came to Wollongong, the Coalcliff Coke works were in operation with huge coal piles, hot coke ovens and a steady stream of trucks that carried, often dripping loads of washed coal or coke to the port along the Prince's Highway. Black dust rendered cars filthy daily. Some days the pervasive smell of coal was everywhere. The steel works had not been cleaned up yet and acquaintances shared stories about the spread of pollution to laundry, yards and lungs when the wind blew in particular directions.

Dust and Traffic

Now Wollongong Coal proposes to process coal in a suburban setting in the 21st century - this is taking the 'heritage' of mining in the Illawarra too far! Increasing my concern is the very poor past record of Wollongong Coal to actually complying with conditions placed on it in the past. In addition the NSW government has not enforced compliance. Coal will be stored in two new stockpiles that will release dust (particulate pollution) into the nearby homes, schools and businesses.

Furthermore, Wollongong Coal intends to transport the coal in trucks along Bellambi Lane, then along Memorial Drive (the Northern Distributor) to the coal terminal in Port Kembla. In order to transport the proposed volume of coal, trucks will leave the site at a maximum frequency of 17 loaded trucks per hour. If we consider the returning trucks, that means up to 34 truck movements per hour. What will happen if those maximum movements occur at peak hour for trades, office, health or education workers or at school delivery or pickup times. Memorial Drive already has distinct rush hours, the parallel suburban streets are much slower and also often crowded as people move towards home or local shops or schools. While the trucks will no doubt have tarps, dust will still be present. Unlike 35 years ago, we see trucks with double trailers on the roads already. Will there be 34 double trailers along Memorial Drive per hour. If so, I fear we will soon have more small roadside accident memorials along the the road.

Then there is the question of how the trucks will be loaded with coal. The plan is to use tractors to load the trucks. Wollongong Coal has previously failed to comply with the condition to build a truck loading facility in the previous approval. The NSW government failed to enforce the condition. The outcome of approval this time - even with a condition to build the truck loading facility - will be more particulate spread in the nearby area. Conditions and promises seem to part of the coal dust thrown in the eyes of residents.

Water Now and into the Future

The mine will be expanded under the Special Areas of the Sydney Water Catchment. Special Areas are forbidden to residents. We cannot go for a bush walk or have a picnic in any Special Area, even those that are very close to parks or settled land. This is to protect the quality of the water that will flow into the dams that provide piped water by Sydney Water. Yet this expansion is proposed for areas that are already damaged by subsidence. Local activists have photographs of cracked sandstone creek beds where the water no longer flows because it runs into the cracks and down, perhaps into the mined coal seams or just further down through the cracks to other cracks. As water flows various minerals are dissolved and carried with the water to poison other streams as the water flows down the escarpment. Cracks drain coastal upland swamps in the Special Areas which threatens vulnerable and threatened species of both flora and fauna. We just don't know much about what is living in many of these swamps and how the ecosystem works. Certainly the swamps provide moisture that protects the Special Area of the Cataract Dam and the Illawarra escarpment forest from fire.

This is unacceptably risky mining, Wollongong Coal admits there might be seam collapse in the older seams leading to subsidence of at least a metre. When we remember that the coal is layered in sandstone, a rock that we see cracking and falling along the coast, we can assume that mining a third seam of coal using any method will lead to vibrations and rock movement. The water that has leaked or flowed into the tunnels through subsidence cracks will be collecting the chemicals that are held in the coal. During the mining itself, the water will no doubt be pumped out. Where will it go? How will poisons be removed?

After Wollongong Coal quits mining, then what? The void left by the coal will fill with water, tunnel by tunnel, seam by seam until it reached the adit. It will then flow down the escarpment. Wollongong Coal admits that the water will be flowing at the rate of 300,000 litres a day by 2179. What will the flow have poisoned by then? What might the lives of those living in the Illawarra be like in 160 years?

In Conclusion

We know that Wollongong Coal is in debt, it does not make enough money to pay company tax, it resists paying a levy to Wollongong Council, it has no water control policies. Why should it be allowed to dig the coal at a cost to residents in money, amenity and health?

I know that a few workers will have mine worker jobs for a few more years if this proposal goes ahead. I don't begrudge them those jobs, but no one is working for Wollongong Coal right now.

I urge the IPC (Russell Vale Expansion) to refuse the proposal because the social, health and environmental costs of mining a third seam of coal and trucking it with disruption and dust is unacceptable in 2020.

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