

**Submission to the NSW Independent Planning Commission
Re: Moolarben Coal Complex – OC3 Extension Project**

I write as a resident of the Mudgee area to object to the approval of the Moolarben Coal Complex OC3 Extension Project.

I request that the Independent Planning Commission refuse consent for this project on the basis that it is inconsistent with the principles of ecologically sustainable development, presents unacceptable environmental and health impacts, threatens regional water security and agricultural productivity, and is contrary to the long-term public interest of New South Wales.

1. Inconsistency with Climate Policy and the Public Interest

The project would enable continued and expanded extraction and export of thermal coal at a time when both Australia and NSW have committed to significant emissions reduction targets. While the proponent may argue that exported emissions are not counted within NSW inventories, the planning system is required to consider downstream (“Scope 3”) emissions when assessing public interest and environmental harm.

Combustion of the coal extracted from the OC3 extension will produce very large quantities of greenhouse gases over the life of the project. Approval would therefore:

- undermine NSW emissions reduction commitments,
- conflict with Australia’s obligations under the Paris Agreement,
- and lock in decades of additional global emissions.

The NSW Land and Environment Court (Rocky Hill decision, Gloucester Resources Ltd v Minister for Planning) established that the climate impacts of exported coal are a relevant planning consideration. The OC3 extension clearly fails this test because it expands — rather than phases down — fossil fuel production during a period of urgent decarbonisation.

2. Unacceptable Air Quality and Health Impacts

Coal mining in the Mudgee–Ulan region has already resulted in cumulative particulate pollution from multiple existing mines. The OC3 extension would significantly increase:

- PM10 and PM2.5 dust pollution
- blasting emissions
- diesel exhaust exposure
- coal handling and transport particulates

Fine particulate matter is linked to:

- cardiovascular disease
- respiratory illness
- asthma exacerbation
- premature mortality

Rural communities have limited access to specialist health services. The burden of disease therefore falls disproportionately on residents of the region. The project adds to an already high cumulative exposure environment and fails the precautionary principle.

Approval would effectively shift private economic benefit onto public health cost.

3. Water Security and Groundwater Impacts

The project presents significant risk to both surface and groundwater systems. The Moolarben mine operates in a region where:

- groundwater supports agriculture,
- aquifers recharge slowly,
- and rainfall is highly variable.

Longwall and open-cut mining can cause:

- aquifer depressurisation
- permanent drawdown
- fracturing of geological strata
- loss of baseflow to creeks

Predicted “make-good” provisions do not restore aquifers. Water systems that take centuries to form cannot be replaced through compensation agreements.

Given increasing drought frequency in NSW, approval would represent a short-term industrial use overriding long-term regional water security.

4. Agricultural and Land Use Conflict

The Central West and Upper Hunter regions are strategically important agricultural areas. Mining expansion creates:

- land sterilisation
- dust deposition on crops and pasture
- reduced livestock productivity
- loss of soil quality
- property devaluation

Agriculture provides sustainable, intergenerational employment. Coal mining does not. The project therefore represents a direct land-use conflict in which a finite extractive industry displaces a permanent food-producing landscape.

Once mined, agricultural capability cannot be restored to its original state, despite rehabilitation claims.

5. Economic Considerations and Employment Claims

Employment benefits are often overstated in mining assessments. Coal mining is increasingly mechanised and provides relatively limited long-term employment compared with:

- agriculture
- renewable energy development
- regional tourism

Furthermore, approval risks creating stranded assets and economic instability as global demand for thermal coal declines. The project therefore exposes the regional economy to future shock rather than supporting economic transition.

6. Biodiversity and Ecological Impacts

The project area contains remnant woodland ecosystems and habitat for threatened species. Even where offsetting is proposed, biodiversity offsets do not replace ecological function. Mature ecosystems cannot be recreated within human timeframes.

Cumulative biodiversity loss across the Western Coalfields is significant. Approval of the OC3 extension would contribute to incremental ecological degradation and habitat fragmentation across the region.

7. Failure of the Precautionary Principle

Under ecologically sustainable development principles, where there is scientific uncertainty but potential for serious environmental damage, approval should not proceed.

There remains uncertainty regarding:

- cumulative dust impacts
- groundwater behaviour
- rehabilitation success
- long-term climate effects

Because impacts may be irreversible, the Commission must err on the side of environmental protection.

Conclusion

The Moolarben OC3 Extension is not a neutral development decision. It is a long-term commitment to expanded fossil fuel extraction with permanent environmental consequences and limited regional benefit.

The project:

- increases greenhouse gas emissions,
- threatens water resources,
- harms community health,
- damages agriculture,
- degrades biodiversity,
- and conflicts with NSW's long-term public interest.

For these reasons, I respectfully request the NSW Independent Planning Commission refuse consent for the Moolarben OC3 Extension Project.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Cleary

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