

## “Reclaiming our Valley”

Hunter Communities Network

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PO Box 14 Singleton 2330

Director Energy and Resources Policy  
Department of Planning Industry and Environment  
Locked Bag 5022,  
Parramatta NSW 2124

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### **Submission Preliminary Regional Impact Assessment Hawkins-Rumker Coal Release Area**

#### **Introduction**

The Hunter Communities Network (HCN) is an alliance of community based groups and individuals impacted by the current coal industry and concerned about the ongoing rapid expansion of coal and coal seam gas exploration and mining in the region.

HCN appreciates that the NSW Government is conducting a preliminary assessment of regional impacts (PRIA) prior to deciding whether to release an area in the Hawkins-Rumker coalfields for exploration.

However, HCN does not support the release of new areas for coal exploration in the Hunter or anywhere else in NSW. We believe there is no rational economic or social justification for doing so.

The Hunter and Western Coalfields have a significant volume of approved coal extraction into the future that is already providing regional jobs, royalties and taxes. Planning for a transition away from fossil fuel industries should be a key focus of the NSW Government.

HCN trusts that the Department of Planning Industry and Environment (DPIE) passes on a thorough summary of issues raised in the PRIA to the Advisory Body for Strategic Release.

This submission will focus on the following issues:

1. Existing social impacts of the Bylong exploration area
2. Cumulative social impacts of mining in the Mid-Western Region LGA
3. Impacts of climate change on the local environment and economy

## **Key Issues**

### **1. Existing social impacts of the Bylong exploration area**

The current social circumstances of the Bylong community is a prime example of the impacts of granting a coal exploration licence in a rural area. The population of farming families has been decimated causing a cascade of social impacts. Mining companies have a policy of buying out properties where the most intensive coal exploration is needed and where coal resources occur.

In the Bylong Valley this has caused the closure of the public school, the loss of successful community fundraising events such as the popular Bylong Mouse Races, loss of social functions at the Bylong Hall, loss of volunteers for the Bylong Bushfire Brigade and loss of parishioners at the one remaining church.

The Bylong General Store has also been under threat, with closure on June 30.

The loss of agricultural production across the properties now owned by the coal industry has been substantive. The loss of agricultural labour and loss of support services such as stock transport, veterinary services and fuel deliveries has had a wider flow-on effect to the surrounding district.

Uncertainty about the future of the area continues while legal action is still underway, contesting the Independent Planning Commission decision to reject the Bylong coalmine project.

The large area of highly productive, prime agricultural farming land purchased by the coal industry has now been put up for leasing arrangements. This further adds to uncertainty for privately owned neighbouring properties about ongoing land management practices.

Negotiated local water-sharing arrangements made by irrigators in the Bylong Valley were flouted by the coal industry property manager during the drought, causing neighbours to lose vital water supply at critical times.

While the Hawkins-Rumker potential release area is more likely for underground mining operations, there are still associated surface disturbances such as coal handling and preparation, emplacement of coal rejects and tailings dams.

A key justification for the Bylong opencut mine was for emplacement of rejects from the more lucrative underground mine.

There are very few stand-alone underground mines operating in the Hunter region.

HCN considers that the social impacts of releasing a new area for coal exploration adjacent to the existing Bylong exploration area will cause a continuing loss of social networks and function across the broader region. It is also likely to cause an increasing loss of agricultural production.

Mining exploration and development will also cause further disruption to water supplies in the Bylong Valley through mining interception of springs and base flows in streams reporting to the Bylong River.

## **2. Cumulative social impacts of mining in the Mid-Western Region LGA**

The nearby exploration licence for minerals at Lue has caused a similar social impact as the Bylong exploration licence, with key families and community leaders selling out and leaving the district. This causes a hollowing out of the local community and its functionality.

The cumulative social impact of large coal mining operations to the north-west of the proposed new coal release area have been highly significant and not adequately assessed by DPIE during the approvals process. A very large area of land is now owned by the coal industry with very few private property owners left between Ulan and Bylong. These families are now very isolated and suffering significant economic and social disadvantage.

The Wollar and Ulan public schools have now closed, adding to the loss of the Bylong public school. There are now no schooling options in a large area of Mid-Western Region LGA for rural families other than very long bus trips to either Mudgee or Rylstone.

The Ulan and Wollar Bushfire Brigades have been closed down, due to lack of local property owners to volunteer. They have been amalgamated into the Cooks Gap Bushfire Brigade that now services a very large area, along with the depleted Bylong Brigade.

The Bylong/Wollar/Ulan areas have experienced a number of Section 44 emergency fires since 2017. The local community is feeling more and more isolated and threatened by extreme fire events and the loss of capacity to protect property.

The Wollar General Store will close at the end of 2021 along with postal and fuel services. The future of the Bylong General Store has been threatened with closure.

The loss of farming families and agricultural operations between Ulan and Bylong has been highly significant and caused a decline in all rural services, including past access to breeding stock, hay supplies, stock transport and farm labour. These are economic losses to the region that have not been factored into any assessment process.

The environmental impact of the mining operations has caused conditions of approval to convert most rehabilitated mine land into bushland for threatened species habitat credits, rather than returning to agricultural land.

The region has also experienced the disastrous Cobbora Mine proposal, west of Gulgong. The mine was approved but never went into construction and operation. The exploration phase for this proposed coal mine impacted generational farming families, threatened the viability of the

township of Dunedoo through loss of customer base, and caused significant social and economic disruption.

There is also the social and economic impact of changes in water supply to the Goulburn River. The regional drawdown of base flows to the Goulburn River through major interceptions from underground and opencut coal mining operations is significant and not adequately assessed or addressed through the planning and approvals process.

During dry periods and intensive drought the intercepted water is kept on mine sites for operational purposes. This denies access to basic rights and water licences further down the river. During wet periods, the mines use approvals to release water into the Goulburn River, causing higher flows that impact on property access and public road access at river crossings.

The cumulative social and economic impacts of mining activities on rural communities is severe in the region and must be better assessed at the PRIA stage.

### **3. Impacts of climate change on the local environment and economy**

Mid-Western Regional LGA has experienced a foretaste of the impacts of climate change through the loss of productivity during the intensive 2018 – 2020 drought that then triggered the extreme bushfires in early 2020.

The PRIA must consider the economic and social impacts of increasing hot temperatures, higher evaporation levels, less rainfall runoff and increased bushfire threat when assessing the justification for releasing up to an estimated 910 million tonnes of coal for extraction.

The most recent report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) advises that no more fossil fuel should be extracted, if there is any hope of maintaining a liveable future.

HCN considers it highly irresponsible of the NSW Government to consider releasing new areas for coal mining. The existing approved operations will be extracting coal up until at least 2045. It is doubtful that there will still be a coal market by that time.

The economic and social impacts of new coal mining projects in the region do not stack up, particularly in regard to climate change threats. These should be given high priority consideration in the PRIA process.

### **Conclusion**

The announcement of the potential Hawkins-Rumker coal release in the NSW Strategic Statement on Coal Exploration and Mining in June 2020, the Future of Coal announcement in August 2020 and the follow up announcement of the Strategic Release Framework made by

Deputy Premier, John Barilaro, during the Upper Hunter by-election in April 2021 confirms that the Wollar/Bylong/Rylstone area is being targeted for new coal mining projects, more than anywhere else in NSW.

This area has already been severely impacted by mining exploration and extraction activities.

HCN trusts that a thorough PRIA process will demonstrate that the cumulative social and environmental impacts of mining in the region are already too great, have not been adequately mitigated and are not in the public interest.

For more information contact:

Bev Smiles

Convenor

[bevsmiles@bigpond.com](mailto:bevsmiles@bigpond.com)