



# Hunter Environment Lobby Inc.

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## **SUBMISSION of OBJECTION**

**Drayton South Coal Project**  
**DA No: 11\_0062**

Dear Sir,

Hunter Environment Lobby Inc. (HEL) is a regional community-based environmental organization that has been active for more than fifteen years on the issues of environmental degradation, species and habitat loss, as well as climate change.

HEL appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Drayton South opencut coal mine project (the proposal) and wishes to strongly object to the proposal because of the significance of its impacts.

The proposal environmental assessment report (EA) identifies key areas of impact that will cause an untenable cumulative degradation of the environmental, social and economic values of the Upper Hunter.

The proposal does not meet the principles of Environmentally Sustainable Development as gazetted in the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* and as such, should not be approved.

HEL wishes to outline the key areas of objection in the following submission points

Yours sincerely

Jan Davis  
President

## 1. Biodiversity Impacts

### 1.1 Vegetation removal

The EA identifies that the proposal will destroy 1,928 hectares of vegetation including 107 hectares of the critically endangered ecological community, Box-Gum Woodland derived native grasses, and 398 hectares of native forest, woodland and shrubland.

This area of clearing includes loss of six endangered vegetation communities listed for protection under the NSW *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (TSCA) and the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC):

- 181 ha Central Hunter Box-Ironbark Woodland listed as endangered under TSCA
- 103 ha Derived Native Grassland – Upper Hunter White Box-Ironbark Grassy Woodland listed as endangered under TSCA and critically endangered under EPBC
- 98 ha Narrabeen Foothills Slaty Box Woodland listed as vulnerable under TSCA
- 63 ha Upper Hunter White Box-Ironbark Grassy Woodland listed as endangered under TSCA and critically endangered under EPBC
- 11 ha Hunter Floodplain Red Gum Woodland listed as endangered under TSCA and critically endangered under EPBC
- 4 ha Derived Native Grassland – Hunter Floodplain Red Woodland Complex listed as endangered under TSCA and critically endangered under EPBC

HEL does not support the proposed mitigation and offset measures for this significant loss of critically endangered vegetation communities.

The footprint of the proposed mine disturbance is on the floor of the Hunter Valley, adjacent to the Hunter River in the Sydney Basin bioregion. The proposed biodiversity offset property is 75km north, high in the Liverpool Ranges, in the Nandewar bioregion.

There is little, if no similarity, between these two sites. The offset proposal does not mitigate the cumulative impacts on biodiversity in the mid reaches of the Hunter River catchment.

The EA identifies that combined with proposed mining authorizations in the vicinity of the proposal, cumulative impacts on vegetation in the area could result in the removal of 5,113 hectares of forest, woodland and derived grassland. This would include approximately 1,073 hectares of the critically endangered Box-Gum Woodland and 835 hectares of other communities listed for protection under TSCA.

This level of cumulative impact is totally unacceptable, particularly under the circumstance that Office of Environment and Heritage are still undergoing a mapping process to identify existing approvals of biodiversity offsets for mining impacts in the Hunter region.

The fact that Department of Planning and Infrastructure has no record of the cumulative impact of previous approvals for the removal of large areas of vegetation and threatened

species habitat, or the condition or position of the approved offsets indicates to HEL that the planning process for large mining projects is not working.

HEL recommends that the proposed loss of remnant vegetation should not be approved.

## **1.2 Loss of threatened species habitat**

The proposal will destroy habitat for five endangered plant species:

- Weeping Myall (*Acacia pendula*)
- River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*)
- Lobed Blue Grass (*Bothriochloa biloba*)
- Tiger Orchid (*Cymbidium canaliculatum*)
- Pink Donkey Orchid (*Diuris tricolor*)

The proposal area supports a very high diversity of native flora with over 250 plant species recorded in the survey.

The EA identifies that the remnant forest and woodland provides important fauna habitat features such as tree hollows, blossom-producing trees and understorey vegetation. The area also provides grasslands, riparian and aquatic habitat and regenerating shrublands and forest.

115 bird species were recorded on site including thirteen threatened species. These included large hollow using forest owls, raptors, robins, treecreepers and honeyeaters. The federally protected Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) was recorded on the site and it is recognized that foraging habitat is also present for the endangered Regent Honeyeater (*Xanthomyza phrygia*).

Eight endangered bat species, including the Large-eared Pied Bat (*Chalinobolus dwyeri*) and Greater Long-eared Bat (*Nyctophilus timoriensis*), listed for protection under EPBC, were recorded on site. These species are particularly threatened by loss of habitat through opencut mining approvals in the Upper Hunter and western coalfields areas.

The number of threatened flora and fauna records surveyed on the proposal site is an indication of its biodiversity significance in the region.

These species are being impacted cumulatively with each new mine approval.

HEL recommends that a full threatened species inventory of the Upper Hunter is required to gain a better understanding of the significance of remnant habitat availability.

## **2. Water Impacts**

### **2.1 Surface water**

HEL objects to the proposal to permanently remove 10% of Saddlers Creek catchment and 4% of Saltwater Creek catchment. The combined impact of loss of base flows through groundwater interception and loss of surface flows will extend the ephemeral nature of the creeks and remove flows into the Hunter River system.

The EA identifies that during and after the life of the proposal, there is potential for the reduction of catchment flows to surrounding waterways, including the Hunter River, Saddlers Creek and Saltwater Creek. This is unacceptable.

Modelling has indicated that there is a 10% chance of an uncontrolled spill from the Rail Loop Dam. This is unacceptable.

Modelling for onsite water storage has indicated significant issues with accumulation of water in out-of-pit storages. This could inhibit mining where active mining areas are required to be used for water storage. The economic impact of this event has not been assessed.

## **2.2 Groundwater**

HEL objects to the proposal causing an average annual loss of 2ML/year to the Hunter River alluvium and 58ML/year from the Saddlers Creek alluvium. This figure is inclusive of post mining losses. There is no indication how this water can be replaced, other than the proponent giving up access to water licences.

The EA also indicates that up to a 2m drawdown is predicted to occur along a 6km section of the Saddlers Creek alluvial aquifer as a result of cumulative impacts with adjoining Mt Arthur Coal Mine.

HEL strongly objects to the proposal for a final void to be part of the post mining landform. This will result in another hyper saline lake left unattended in the landscape of the Upper Hunter region and is unacceptable.

HEL recommends that Department of Planning and Infrastructure conduct an assessment of existing final voids and those approved for current mining operations in the Valley. The cumulative impact of major groundwater drawdown over long periods of time has not been adequately assessed.

The EA identifies that the final void post-mining equilibrium level (approximately RL 177 m) will be reached after approximately 1,000 years. This legacy over such a long time frame is totally unacceptable and impossible to regulate.

## **3. Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

The EA predicts that the proposal will produce an additional 0.31 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per year for 27 years, including the mining, transportation of the coal to the Port of Newcastle and end usage of the coal.

At a time when the impacts of climate change are now being felt throughout the global economy and effort is being made to reduce carbon emissions, it is irresponsible for the NSW Government to continue to approve new coal mining proposals.

This proposed increase in greenhouse gas production is not acceptable.

#### **4. Impacts on neighbours and other industries**

The EA does not adequately address the negative impacts the proposal will have on neighbouring properties and industries.

The EA acknowledges that cumulative impacts on air quality cannot be predicted precisely and that exceedances will occur for both dust and noise levels.

HEL objects to the limited consideration given to the impacts on the neighbouring thoroughbred horse studs of a project that will operate 24 hours/day emitting noise, dust, heavy machinery vibrations and low frequency noise constantly.

The impacts of this proposal on the diversity of industry in the vicinity has not been adequately assessed. These industries include seven thoroughbred horse studs including the world renowned Coolmore and Woodlands studs, eleven dairies, four vineyards including three with wineries and an olive grove with a processing plant.

The Upper Hunter must be able to keep this mixed agricultural economy functioning into the longterm. The impacts of large open cut mining operations have now reached saturation point and can no longer be adequately regulated for cumulative impact.

The high air pollution alerts occurring across the Upper Hunter Air Quality Monitoring Network is an indication that the current level of opencut mining activity in the region is already too great.

The health risks for the community in the Hunter Region has now reached critical levels. There is no adequate justification for this proposal to be approved. The longterm impacts will be a far greater cost to society than the short term gains of royalties.

HEL does not support the economic assessment for this proposal and believes that it vastly overstates the benefits while underplaying the extent of the long term negative economic impacts.

HEL recommends that the Drayton South Coal Project not be approved