

## EDO Mining Law Reform Launch – 29 June 2011

Presentation by Bev Smiles, community representative

While the mining boom is producing prosperity for many in our country, it is causing major problems and increasing polarization in many mining related communities.

The environmental assessment process used to approve new mining operations in NSW gives scant consideration to social values, community function or historic associations.

Local governments are lumbered with ever increasing infrastructure maintenance costs with increased traffic movements on local roads, while housing affordability, access to health services, competition for trades people and other negative impacts are experienced by the general community in mining towns. This has led to the campaign 'Royalties for Regions' calling for the financial benefits of mining to be returned to the regions of production.

In the Mudgee area, one of the fastest expanding coal mining regions in the state, the Mid Western Regional Council has found itself facing a \$32m road upgrade because of the incremental increase of mine traffic caused by 3 separate mine approvals. Road safety is a major issue in mining areas. The number of fatalities on the New England Hwy between Singleton and Muswellbrook is significant. Many locals put this down to worker fatigue after the 12 hour shifts.

Property values are affected in two opposing directions. In the nearby towns rentals and house prices are pushed beyond the capacity of the original community. The wages paid to miners overheats the local economy thus causing haves and have nots.

Recently in Mudgee, a three bedroom house appeared on the rental market and over 80 people applied. Housing availability has not kept up with the sudden increase in demand because of the rapid growth of the mining workforce moving into the area. When leases run out, rents can increase significantly so that only mine workers can afford to live there. This is pushing local families into financial difficulties or out of the area.

The opposite occurs on properties affected by the impacts of mining operations, namely noise and dust pollution and regular explosions. Property values drop on the open market, so that often the only buyer left is the mining company. Residents made ill from the effects of living near a mine might sell at whatever price they can get to move away.

In my village of Wollar, over 70 properties from the surrounding area, including the general store, have been purchased by Peabody Energy, operator of the Wilpinjong Mine approved in 2006. The pre-mine public meetings held by the proponents gave glowing tales of how the village and community would prosper and benefit from the mine. Instead we are experiencing

the destruction of a close knit community to such an extent that the churches are closing, the volunteer firebrigade will not have the capacity to handle a major bushfire and the school is also under threat of closure.

The strong networks and local knowledge built up through generations is being lost. The intrinsic social functions that keep remote rural communities strong and effective under the threat of fire, drought, flood and other adversity have not been recognized in any way.

Some communities have experienced the downside of the mining industry in the Hunter region for many years while others are newly finding themselves in the sights of a rapid expansion.

While the mining industry continues to repeat the mantra that it is the most regulated industry in Australia, local communities find themselves on the receiving end of a juggernaut that appears to be totally out of control.

A small group of residents of the Hunter Valley gathered in Singleton recently to discuss the complex and far ranging impacts of the rapidly expanding coal and gas industry in the region.

Some of the major threats to the community were identified including:

- Loss of water quality and flow, loss of air quality, noise and light pollution, loss of amenity, loss of community, loss of productive land, loss of property value, loss of biodiversity and Aboriginal culture and heritage, threats to other industries, competition for workforce.
- Problems with the definition of prime agricultural land
- The spin and resources of the NSW Minerals Council
- Divide and conquer techniques of industry – targeting key community members, contracts of confidentiality
- Feelings of disempowerment, helplessness, lack of control, illness, depression, stress, grieving, solastalgia – which is a concept developed by Glenn Albrecht at Newcastle University to describe the loss of peace or solace in your own home.
- Overwhelming number and size of proposals at exploration, planning assessment, approval, modification and variation stages
- Lack of resources for community to provide adequate expert response to environmental assessment reports and follow up the complex planning processes

- Revolving door between consultants, industry staff, Govt staff and Planning Assessment processes
- Industry access to Government in relation to community access

While it is commonly recognized that the Hunter Valley is still the major source of increased production of coal and coal seam methane, many people in the community, including mine workers, have reached the point of believing that 'enough is enough'.

The reality of the "most regulated industry" can be highlighted in a number of clear examples:

- The expensive Upper Hunter air quality monitoring program, being established by NSW Office of Environment and Heritage with the coal industry and power stations, is in fact a dust monitoring program that mostly measures dust particles too large to influence community health. The pollution emissions from burning large amounts of diesel, large volumes of explosives and combustion of coal at the power stations is still unmonitored at the regional scale.
- The Industrial Noise Policy which guides conditions of approval for 24 hour mining operations in remote rural locations ignores the existing low level background noise levels and gives exemptions to the industry when cold air inversions intensify noise. This policy leaves the community totally unprotected from the health impacts of sleep deprivation and low frequency noise.

Until a process of independent cost-benefit analysis assesses all the impacts and costs of the mining industry on communities, on other industries and on the environment in the long term, only the short term benefits of jobs and investment are fully understood.

This short sighted approach to an industry that alters entire landscapes, populations and human associations is leaving an untenable legacy to present and future generations of Australians.