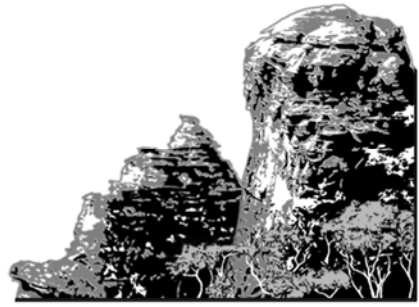




Protect the Gardens of Stone

“Say NO to open cut mining!”



Tuesday 31st May, 2011

Media Release: For immediate release

“New evidence amplifies concerns over Coalpac's consolidation project”

A threatened species confirmed to be existing in the Ben Bullen State Forest area adds to a growing list of flora species Coalpac Pty Ltd has failed to identify within its flora assessments for current and proposed mining projects. Environment group's caution the company's track record raises further concerns for the community over the 'Coalpac Consolidation Project' Cullen Bullen NSW.

The Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) recently confirmed the existence of the threatened species *Persoonia marginata* within Coalpac Pty Ltd's Cullen Valley Mine mining lease.

“While we appreciate Coalpac has responded by committing to producing a Species Management Plan now that a nationally listed threatened species has been detected in an area proposed for clearing, it brings us to ask “What else is being missed?”. This is not the first case of the company failing to identify species in one of its flora assessments,” says Lachlan Garland, President of the Blue Mountains Conservation Society.

“Without the voluntary work of local botanists, the existence of this species would have gone under the radar,” says Mr Garland.

Coalpac Pty Ltd is due to present its Environmental Assessment regarding its 'Coalpac Consolidation Project' Cullen Bullen NSW. The Director General's requirements were finalised in 16th October, 2010. The project has been declared a Controlled Action under the EPBC Act.

“Despite undertaking seven field surveys before lodging this Proposed Action at least 75 plants were missed in their surveys. There are in fact at least 350 plant species of which 6 are listed as Rare or Threatened Australian Plants (ROTAP) existing within the proposed area to be cleared. In effect, the ecological surveys have understated the diversity of the area to be open cut,” says Chris Jonkers, Natural Areas Project Office of the Lithgow Environment Group.

“Due to Coalpac's track record of inadequate flora assessments, environment groups are calling for the Department of Planning to commission an independent flora assessment. The results of this combined with other threats to matters of national environmental significance, we would see the proposal be rejected by the NSW Government,” says Mr Jonkers.

“The natural and recreational values of the area have a life span well beyond the 21 years Coalpac would take to destroy the heritage value of this gateway area to the Gardens of Stone,” says Mr Jonkers.

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BACKGROUND BRIEFING:

The uniquely scenic and biodiverse Gardens of Stone is under imminent threat due to a consolidation proposal by Coalpac Pty Ltd. Environment groups around the state have called on the NSW Government to reject the 'Coalpac Consolidation Project' Cullen Bullen, NSW and act to protect the region within a State Conservation Area.

Environment groups support the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service wish to add the Ben Bullen State Forest to the conservation reserve system as a matter of priority.

Due to Coalpac's track record of inadequate flora assessments, environment groups are now calling for the Department of Planning to commission an independent flora assessment of the proposal. Groups believe the results of this, combined with other threats to matters of national environmental significance, would see the proposal be rejected.

Growing concerns over Coalpac Pty Ltd's flora assessments

Environment Groups call on the Department of Planning to conduct an independent Flora Assessment due to the findings of the Lithgow Environment Group. The group has:

- Recorded some specimens of the species *Persoonia marginata* to date.
- Recorded 4 other ROTAP listed species within the proposed mine disturbance area that are not identified on Coalpac's Species List;
- Recorded over 60 additional plant species within the proposed mine disturbance area that are not identified on Coalpac's Species List, some of which are quite unusual or rare;
- Recorded several populations of *Bursaria spinosa* ssp *lasiophylla* not identified in Coalpac's Species List, host plant for the Vulnerable Bathurst Copper Butterfly (*Paralucia spinifera*);
- Recorded additional stands of *Eucalyptus blakelyi* with grassy understorey (possible indicator of the EEC of Box Gum Woodland) within proposed Area's 120, 121 and woodland north and east of here on the western side of the Castlereagh Hwy. These potential Box Gum Woodland area's were not identified in Coalpac's recent submission under the EPBC Act.

Concerns over Coalpac's environmental management

- Despite undertaking seven field surveys before lodging this Proposed Action, the proponent missed at least 75 native plants.
- At the Invincible mine, the proponent was fined \$200,000 on one occasion for exceeding the coal production limits and on eleven other occasions for pollution incidents.
- The proponent's Invincible Colliery open cut mine approval (7 September 2006) was based on a claim that "the open cut operations would not be visible from the Castlereagh Highway." Steep cuts into the escarpment of BBSF are already visible from the highway.
- The proponent's failure to use sterile grass in a previous rehabilitation program now threatens the ecology of BBSF.
- The proponent's claim to be able to back-fill the massive excavations that will terminate against highwall scarps of up to 100 metres high in the hillsides of the Great Dividing Range, whilst concurrently retaining a shallow slope, is highly dubious.

Environment groups oppose 'Coalpac Consolidation Proposal' Cullen Bullen, NSW

The proposal, characterised as 'consolidation', involves a massive expansion of mining and its environmental impacts, such that the natural values of the area are irredeemably damaged:

- If approved, the mine would scalp all biodiversity from 1088 hectares, the equivalent of 2,176 football fields, of mainly old growth forest and wildlife habitat in the BBSF, and turn its geodiversity into piles of waste rock.
- The Gardens of Stone is famous for its iconic and unique sandstone turrets or 'pagodas'. If approved, their features and stability may be threatened by partial or total collapse, compromising the region's tourism.
- A significant number of endangered flora and fauna species prefer growing in pagoda-related habitats.
- 196 hectares containing *Eucalyptus cannonii*, listed as 'vulnerable', and 40 hectares of Box Gum Woodland, listed as 'critically endangered' under the EPBC Act, will be removed.
- History shows that rehabilitation is woefully inadequate and totally incapable of restoring the original biodiversity and geodiversity of an area.
- **Environment groups support the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service wish to add the Ben Bullen State Forest to the conservation reserve system as a matter of priority; it is an area with outstanding natural values.**