



Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

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Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

Ms Tracy Mackey
Chief Executive Officer,
NSW EPA
Locked Bag 5022,
Parramatta NSW 2124

By email: info@epa.nsw.gov.au

14 January 2022

Dear Ms Mackey,

Clarence Colliery continuing discharge of polluted mine water to Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society (the Society) is a community-based volunteer organisation with around 900 members. Our mission is to help protect, conserve and advocate for the natural environment of the Greater Blue Mountains. In fulfilling its mission the Society advocates for the protection of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWA).

The Society is writing regarding the mine waste discharge from Clarence Colliery near Lithgow. The Society is pleased that the EPA has ensured that heavy metals levels have been controlled and we understand that this is now having a positive impact on the aquatic species in the river. However, we are concerned and disappointed that Clarence Colliery is still discharging polluted mine water with no upper limits to salinity concentrations that flows into the Wollangambe River. This is despite the EPA's efforts and aspirations to correct this going back to at least the review of Clarence Colliery's discharge licence in 2014. Clarence Colliery is located just outside the GBMWA and the Wollangambe River flows through GBMWA. This discharge is approved and regulated by Environmental Protection Licence 726.

Overview

In March 1999 Centennial Coal proposed a new water management scheme for Clarence Colliery noting that pollution of the Wollangambe River 'is not an option that is acceptable to Centennial, the Department of Land and Water Conservation, Lithgow City Council or the Environmental Protection Authority.'

The 2014 review of EPL 726 included public exhibition because of public interest and attracted a large number of submissions calling for the discharge to be improved. In

2015 the EPA also commissioned Office of Environment and Heritage to provide "... an independent assessment of the state of the Wollangambe River, including upstream and downstream of where the colliery discharges quantities of mine water." (EPA website). This report confirmed the peer reviewed research by Mr Nakia Belmer and others of the University of Western Sydney that disposal of wastewater from Clarence Colliery into the headwaters of the Wollangambe River, a high conservation value waterway, has caused water pollution and ecological degradation. The report found that there was "a clear need to review the limits for metals and conductivity" (a measure of salinity concentration) in the discharge because it was inappropriate for waters entering a world heritage area. The Society attended a number of meetings and a site inspection with the EPA and other stakeholders to discuss the report and EPA's plans to rectify the discharge.

In 2016 the EPA applied discharge quality targets but no limits for conductivity and the mine was required to implement a program of exotoxicology monitoring. In 2017 EPA confirmed that it wanted "to reduce salinity levels from the discharge to Clarence to the required 100 electrical conductivity."¹ In 2018 the strategy for the Colliery was to install infrastructure to transfer the discharge to Coxs River. There have been several proposals but no outcome. The issue of who would pay for the transfers now appears to associate this transfer with the possible approval of the McPhillamy Gold Project mine (SSD-9505). The EPA's website states that EPL726 was reviewed in 2019 but there is no information about the review.

The World Heritage Committee on 7 June 2019 "...noted with concern that several mining projects exist in the vicinity of or adjacent to the (Greater Blue Mountains World heritage Area), and that some mining activities have resulted in impacts on the property, as evidenced by the incident at the Clarence Colliery, and also requests the State Party (Australia) to undertake an assessment of potential cumulative impacts of all existing and planned mining projects in the vicinity of the property through a Strategic Environmental Assessment or a similar mechanism ... " This study has been undertaken by CSIRO and is understood to be ready to be submitted soon.

Meanwhile, the mine discharge continues to the present day (seven years after the EPL Review) with no limits on salinity. The 2021 monthly discharge samples reported by the Mine showed salinity levels from 279 to 392. The Society requests a meeting with the EPA to provide a progress update on reducing water pollution discharged from coal mines in the Gardens of Stone region.

Yours sincerely



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¹ EPA News Release 17.3.2017 and EPA letter to Colong Foundation dated 2.10.2017.