

GROUNDSWELL GLOUCESTER
PRESENTATION TO PLANNING ASSESSMENT COMMISSION
ROCKY HILL COAL PROJECT

Commissioners

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Department of Planning's Assessment Report and Recommendation for the Rocky Hill Coal Project.

Groundswell Gloucester is a community-based organisation that seeks to preserve the essential rural nature of the town by promoting sustainable development opportunities based on the natural advantages that have already shaped our flourishing agricultural and tourism industries.

Groundswell Gloucester made a comprehensive submission in response to the Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Rocky Hill Coal Project. I do not intend to revisit that submission today, but I commend the submission to Commissioners and have attached the Executive Summary and Recommendations to the transcript of my remarks, which I will tender to the Commission.

This project was first mooted in 2006 when Exploration Licences were granted to the then Gunnedah Resources Ltd. For more than 10 years the prospect of an open-cut coalmine being developed on Gloucester's doorstep has hung over this community like the Sword of Damocles. This has created enormous anxiety, stress and despair for residents. You will hear from many of these during this meeting.

From the time of the first public meeting in 2006, called after the granting of the Exploration Licences, until today, this community has continually expressed its vehement and overwhelming opposition to this project. In February 2009, after Gloucester Resources had begun buying properties in Fairbairns Road, 850 people filled the Recreation Centre and expressed unanimous opposition to the project. This was endorsed at subsequent public meetings and through a survey undertaken by Gloucester Shire Council. In July this year, a ReachTEL survey conducted across the Gloucester local area revealed that 73% of people were opposed to the Rocky Hill Coal Project. Only 19% expressed support.

But it hasn't just been the local community who have opposed this development. Holiday-makers who return to Gloucester year after year, attracted by our clean air and water, are deeply concerned that a coalmine is proposed to be developed on Gloucester's doorstep. Many have written submissions in response to the EIS, expressing outrage and opposition to this proposed development. Similarly, friends and relatives of local residents have also written submissions opposing the Project.

Gloucester Shire Council also consistently expressed opposition to the Project. Since 2000 the Local Environment Plan (LEP) has zoned the area where the mine would be located as Environmental Management, for "preservation of the scenic integrity of the township within its delightful rural landscape". Open-cut coalmining was specifically prohibited because of its incompatibility with the LEP. More recently, MidCoast Council has reiterated this position.

In addition, many public figures have expressed opposition to the development of an open-cut coalmine on Gloucester's doorstep. These include:

George Souris AM former Nationals member for Upper Hunter (State Hansard)

Bob Baldwin former Liberal member for Paterson (Federal Hansard)

Rob Oakeshott former Independent member for Lyne (Federal Hansard)

Dr David Gillespie MP Nationals member for Lyne (public meeting in Gloucester)

John Turner former Nationals member for Myall Lakes and former Administrator MidCoast Council (Submission to EIS)

Adam Searle MLC Labor Shadow Minister (Email to Groundswell Gloucester)

Jeremy Buckingham MLC Greens Spokesperson for Mining (State Hansard)

From the outset, GRL knew that this proposed mine was not wanted by the community and was incompatible with Council's planning policies. Despite this the directors of GRL, driven by wilful self-interest, pushed on. This will surely go down as one of the most shameful episodes in Australian corporate history.

After its assessment of all matters relevant to this project, the Department of Planning has concluded that the project should not be approved and recommended that this Commission so determine.

The assessment has given key consideration to potential impacts on visual amenity, proximity to rural-residential estates, noise, air quality, water resources, health, rehabilitation, socio-economics, Aboriginal and historic heritage, biodiversity, transport and agriculture. The Assessment Report states that the Department

considers the project's "proximity to existing residential areas exacerbates its predicted visual amenity, noise and air quality impacts". It also refers to other "unresolved issues", particularly with respect to water and social impacts. In short, "the project site is not a suitable site for an open-cut coalmine".

Groundswell Gloucester strongly supports and endorses these comments. In fact, they go to the primary issues of concern identified by Groundswell Gloucester in its submission to the EIS.

The Report does not present a finely balanced assessment and a line-ball Recommendation that could have gone either way. Rather it is a detailed, comprehensive and compelling rebuttal of the Project concluding with the firm Recommendation that the Project not be approved.

With respect to proximity to rural residential estates, visual amenity and noise the report is unequivocal and damning. In most other areas assessed, the Department identifies uncertainties and unresolved issues.

I realise that Commissioners will have read the Report but I would like to briefly quote some key comments. Other speakers will address these issues in more detail.

Proximity to Rural-Residential Estates

"... GRL has not demonstrated that it could operate the mine without creating conflict with these estates, which were developed specifically to provide a particular type of housing to attract lifestyle retirees and hobby farmers to the area. The Department considers these particular land uses, as currently configured at Gloucester, are incompatible with mining activities within the proximity proposed by GRL."

Noise

"For GRL's proposed noise mitigation methodology to be successful, there would need to be personnel continually monitoring noise levels and having the authority to order particular mining operations to be reduced, varied, relocated or shut down. On a mine site, the person with ultimate authority is the mine manager. However, a mine manager is also charged with the efficient, on-time, on-budget production of coal. This is a conflict in roles that the Department has observed to have not always been well resolved in the mining industry." Now there's a loaded statement that warrants investigation!

“The Department’s concern is that the mine would operate not only at the margin of its proposed noise limits, but would regularly cross those limits. GRL’s proposed management of noise impacts is too risky to endorse. In respect of its likely noise impacts, the Department is unable to recommend approval of the project.”

Air Quality

“The Department remains concerned about the consequences of unplanned blast fume and/or spontaneous combustion events on air quality and, consequently amenity for the residents surrounding the proposed mine, including Gloucester. Even though the risk of unplanned emissions may be low, the consequences would be potentially significant.”

Surface Water

“While the Department considers that GRL has addressed most issues associated with surface water in a comprehensive manner, there remain uncertainties that impact on the ability to recommend approval of the amended project, as currently presented.”

Ground Water

“The Department believes that GRL has not established, with sufficient certainty that it has guaranteed access to the future water entitlements that this project requires for groundwater taken from the fractured and porous rock sources. Accordingly, the Department is unable to recommend the approval of the amended project.”

Health

The Report is relatively uncritical about health impacts apart from noting the elevated levels of stress, anxiety and depression in the community. Groundswell Gloucester believes the health impacts are likely to be much greater than portrayed. The inadequate representation of the health impacts from mining and the associated lack of a necessary duty of care will be addressed by Dr Steve Robinson of the Gloucester Environment Group.

Best Practice

The Department has commended GRL for a number of aspects that it considers to be industry Best Practice. Groundswell Gloucester suggests that not leaving a final void at the conclusion of mining and using only noise-attenuated machinery should be mandatory and therefore unremarkable. And utilising the Stratford Mining

Complex to process and transport coal simply shifts the impact of these activities onto the long-suffering residents of Stratford and Craven.

The Assessment Report states that the Department “acknowledges that the amended project would deliver economic and employment benefits to the Gloucester region and State economies for the period that the mine would be operational.” However the Department is somewhat equivocal in its analysis.

At Section 6.9.3 it is stated, “In the Department’s view, the conclusions of both the amended environmental assessment’s economic analysis and the submissions opposing the amended project are not firm indicators as to what may actually come to pass. Many assumptions on which such predictions are made are subject to volatile fluctuations or would otherwise materially affect the net benefit outcome for the project.”

The Report also dismisses GRL’s projection that 75% of operational jobs would be filled by Gloucester district residents, suggesting that it would likely not exceed 38% because “the Gloucester district’s workforce is not sufficiently large or able to readily deliver many of the skills sought by large mining operations” and “it is likely that workers currently residing in the broader Hunter Region or other areas of NSW would benefit most from the project’s employment opportunities”.

Groundswell Gloucester submits that a fundamental and significant trend has not been factored into the Department’s assessment. The coal industry workforce has been shrinking rapidly as a result of improvements in technology. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian coalmining industry shed half its workforce between 1987 and 2002. This trend has accelerated in recent years. This is not the result of radical changes in government policy but simply from mining companies’ pursuit of higher profits through the adoption of less labour-intensive practices. Robot trucks and excavators are no longer the stuff of science fiction writers. Jobs forecast today may not actually eventuate tomorrow.

And in an era of rapid social change and the development of new technologies such as robotics, artificial intelligence, 3D printing and renewable electricity generation, there are untold opportunities for sustainable development in Gloucester that cannot yet be predicted or possibly even imagined.

But one thing is certain. The development of an open-cut coalmine on Gloucester's doorstep will likely kill these opportunities.

Groundswell Gloucester notes that the separate application by Yancoal to amend development consent to allow the Stratford Mining Complex to receive ROM coal from the Rocky Hill mine, is consequent on the Rocky Hill Coal Project being approved. Groundswell Gloucester supports the recommendation of the Department of Planning that the Commission also refuse this application.

In conclusion

The Department has considered the Project against the objects of the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act. It considers that the Project is unlikely to promote social and economic welfare or provide a better environment for the community of Gloucester.

Commissioners, the project site is not a suitable site for an open cut coalmine.

Groundswell Gloucester submits that the case for rejecting the Project has been overwhelmingly prosecuted and respectfully urges the Commission to determine accordingly.