

Evidence mounts against longwall mining in catchments

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The NSW Government continues to resist efforts by environment groups to protect Sydney's southern drinking catchments and other precious water resources from the impacts of longwall coal mining. It is surprising that so far the continuing destruction of rivers, creeks and other water resources by longwall mining has gone largely unseen and unreported, while water has become firmly entrenched as a major issue on the NSW political landscape.

Longwall mining commenced in Australia in the late 1960s and allows mining companies better coal recovery rates and profitability when compared with the older bord and pillar methods of underground mining. The method, however, also results in far more dynamic ground subsidence, and reports of widespread damage keep coming in from all of the state's major coalfields.

The Metropolitan Special Area catchment south of Sydney contains four dams that provide the city with 20% of its drinking water. Managed by the Sydney Catchment Authority (SCA), they are largely in a pristine condition with no public access and heavy fines apply, even for entering them on foot. Six coal mines, mostly owned by BHP Billiton, are operating under these water supply catchments, with leases that extend from the Illawarra escarpment inland to the Macarthur Region.

Tributaries flowing into all four dams in the Metropolitan catchment, as well as in the Woronora catchment, have now been cracked and drained by longwall mining. The NSW Government's standard response to this damage is that no water is being lost. This is despite comments by bodies, such as the SCA and CSIRO, that state there is simply no baseline data available from which to draw this conclusion. Another typical response is to blame decreased flows following the cracking of a riverbed on the drought. In the case of the Waratah Rivulet in the Woronora catchment, this just doesn't wash as other creeks in the area are currently flowing healthily. The same evidence is found in the Metropolitan catchment, where only those streams above longwall mining operations have been damaged.

Late last year the Waratah Rivulet, which makes up 30% of the Woronora Dam catchment to south of Heathcote, was discovered to be cracked in thousands of places and entirely drained for two kilometres of its length following mining at the nearby Metropolitan Colliery. The ensuing television reports prompted the Minister for Mineral Resources, Ian Macdonald, to acknowledge that there was a problem in the Waratah Rivulet, but claimed that the damage would be fixed and no water was being lost.

Following years of community indignation and after the NSW Scientific Committee's listing of longwall mining as a *key threatening process* affecting endangered upland swamps, and the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) has introduced a new approval regime in an attempt to address the damaging effects of coal mining. The new process involves the preparation of Subsidence Management Plans (SMPs) by mining companies. After three years it is clear that these SMPs are doing little to prevent damage to the environment and are, in fact, being used as a means of

justifying the destruction of precious water resources. The Director-General of the DPI alone makes the final decision on approving an SMP, even where mining operations could affect our precious drinking water catchments.

The SMP process is failing, as new areas for longwall coal mining are routinely approved without modification by the DPI. Documents obtained through Freedom of Information applications have shown that recommendations to further restrict mining by independent experts engaged to advise the DPI are ignored. Mining companies are using the SMP process merely to monitor subsidence and disruption to water flows, without doing anything to prevent the damage being cause.

There is growing disquiet in communities whose essential water resources are being damaged or threatened by longwall mining. Along with the Rivers SOS coalition, whose membership consists of 35 peak and local environment organisations, new groups have formed in the Sutherland Shire in response to the Waratah Rivulet debacle and in the Wyong Shire, whose supply catchment is under threat from a Korean company's proposal to mine directly under Jilliby Creek.

In an attempt to diffuse the situation until after the election, the NSW Government has announced two inquiries into longwall mining - one in the southern coalfields and the other into the Wyong proposal. Apart from the possible use of the inquiries as a delaying tactic, there are significant problems of mining industry bias with the terms of reference and in the make-up of the panels that will hear the evidence. A small concession by the industry was also made to conservationist's efforts in the western coalfields. Felix Resources has promised it's Moolarben Mine would not come closer than 500m to the Great Dripping Wall - still close enough though to produce significant subsidence, and possibly damage.

With both climate change and water issues dominating the election, the conservation movement has proposed sizeable buffer zones to protect our water resources from longwall mining. The Greens and the Democrats support this position, while we are still waiting for protection policies from both major parties. Clearly the ongoing industry culture of monitoring and repairing stream-bed cracks, without any long-term proof that such remediation works, is just an extended experiment. Such damaging mining should not be allowed to continue and precious water resources must not be traded away by the NSW Government for coal royalties.