

LATROBE VALLEY SUSTAINABILITY GROUP OPPOSITION TO EXPORT COAL MINING FROM GIPPSLAND

PO Box 1355 Traralgon VIC. 3844

Export of Gippsland Coal Coordinator: Dan Caffrey



I am writing on behalf of the Latrobe Valley Sustainability Group, expressing our deep disappointment to hear of the announcement of the opening up for tender to companies to export brown coal from much of the Latrobe Valley and Gippsland. In so doing, the State Government is making a decision in Melbourne that will have increasingly detrimental affects to the people of the Latrobe Valley and Gippsland as a whole for generations to come.

Our objections are based on environmental, social and economic concerns.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Enhancement of Global Warming and Climate Change

Recently the CSIRO and the Australian Bureau of Meteorology released their joint 2-yearly statement summarising the climate data and trends regarding global climate change. The salient points from this report were that

- Despite the last two and a half years being La Nina events, which should significantly cool worldwide temperatures, the average global temperatures over the last decade have been the highest for any decade in recorded history. Today, globally, temperatures are higher than the long-term average by about 0.9° C compared to the global average 100 years ago.
- In the last two years, sea temperatures are the highest they have ever been since records have been kept. The year 2010 was the highest ever recorded and resulted in the extreme flooding in Queensland, NSW and Victoria in early 2011.
- Sea levels are rising at about 5 mm every year and that the rate of increase in sea level rise has been greater in the period 1993 to the present than the average for the entire 20th Century average, suggesting that the trend is accelerating. Sea levels have risen 21 cm from 1880 levels, with most of this in the last 40 years.
- The sea level rise is mostly due to thermal expansion, as the seawater particles take up more space creating the rise in levels worldwide. However, increasing amounts of fresh water from the worlds melting glaciers is being emptied into the oceans, which will result in an accelerating rate of sea level rise in the future.
- Methane levels entering the atmosphere, which had stabilised since 2003, are increasing again, largely because of thawing tundra. Methane, although shorter lived in the atmosphere than CO₂, is 21 times more potent a greenhouse gas than CO₂.
- Because there are radioactive forms of carbon dioxide which are produced by natural processes, and that the most common of these is carbon-14, which has a half life of 11,500 years, the CSIRO have been able to determine that humans burning fossil fuels have been the cause of the increasing level of CO₂ entering the atmosphere as the proportion of carbon-14 to carbon-12 has reduced in line with the 40% increase in CO₂ levels since the early 1800's. This is because the radioactive isotopes have decayed over the millions of years that they have been in the ground and coal, oil and gas contain virtually none of them.

- There has been an increasing trend towards extreme weather events because of the rising atmospheric and sea surface temperatures and that this trend will continue as more greenhouse gases enter the atmosphere.
- The report re-stated the already widely known scientific consensus that global temperatures will rise between 1° C and 5° C by 2070 with the likelihood that it will move towards the higher end of this range.

This report along with the thousands of other pieces of scientific data from observatories and climate science organizations around the world categorically states that it is the burning of fossil fuels that is the main contributor to the increasing levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and that these gases are warming the atmosphere.

Destruction of Food Producing Land

Already 4% of the land area of Latrobe City is open cut mine along with the buffer zones and land on which the production assets are situated.

- With the opening up of coal mining for export, the rate of loss of valuable fertile food producing land will be greatly accelerated.
- Land for habitation will be lost, restricting the growth of towns and communities
- There will be less land for wildlife, threatening the existence of some species, which are already under pressure from increasing urbanisation and loss of habitat
- The attractiveness and visual amenity will be substantially less, rendering this part of Gippsland less attractive to live in.
- In some cases, vast changes to the natural landscape will need to be made. Not only will the open-cut devour land, but also rivers and creeks will have to be re-routed and the natural drainage patterns will be altered, which could foreseeably cause flooding and erosion problems in hitherto unaffected areas.

Once the land has been mined it is useless for any other use. Future generations are locked out of this area forever.

Air Quality

Open-cut operations always have an adverse effect on the quality of air near their operations as fine dust particles are released into the atmosphere. This is plainly evident on a still day when looking over the Morwell open-cut from the Powerworks hill site in the late afternoon.

Health Considerations

Wherever open cut coal mines are in operation there have been health problems. Issues reported from coal communities near open cuts in NSW and Queensland, include

- Respiratory diseases and asthma – already reported in the Latrobe Valley
- Increased cancer rates possibly because of carcinogens in the fossil fuels
- Hydrocarbon poisoning resulting in chronic fatigue like syndromes
- Noise from the mining operations resulting in sleep deprivation and increased stress levels.

Water Issues

Mining has to use vast amounts of water in its operations. Due to the combustible nature of brown coal which is subject to spontaneous combustion when dry, it has to be kept moist at all times. This means that more water has to be diverted from the Latrobe River Catchment, which is already extremely stressed in dry

years and already has affected the health of the Gippsland Lakes. Less water for the Lakes means deterioration in their quality and health and a reduction in that regions capacity to draw tourists.

Liveability

With a vastly industrial landscape, the pleasantness and enjoyment one gains from living in small rural communities will be severely decreased by having giant open cut mines in the vicinity.

SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Because the wide-scale roll out of large mining projects will affect the region permanently, there are a number of social considerations, which should be paramount in the decision-making processes here.

Social licence

- How much were local residents involved in the decision-making to open Gippsland to the mining companies? Did any of the farmers whose land will be annexed for the coal mining have any input into the discussion? Do any nearby residents have any idea that their land will be dug up?
- The way the decision was made seems to indicate that the project developers have been talking to government for a long time and have locked out local people from the discussion.
- With the development of large-scale base-load renewable energy technologies, people see that there is now less need for coal to provide electricity. In many sunny countries around the world, thermal solar power stations with salt storage are being built and have been found to work well providing around the clock electricity. Supplemented by wind, geothermal, biomass, ocean wave and tidal electricity generation, these countries are rapidly moving towards a carbon neutral electricity supply system. Australians are increasingly demanding clean energy. We don't want a dirty second-rate energy supply. We demand to have the best in the world.
- The miners say that we have a responsibility to third world countries to provide energy so that they can develop. However, they and the world would be much better off if we did not encourage them into the habit of coal use and instead supply them with renewable energy technology and energy efficiency, so that they develop energy self-sufficiency and not rely on buying coal imports which they can't really afford anyway.
- World-wide, it has been recognised that trace elements such as lead, uranium, cadmium, mercury and other heavy metals are bio-accumulating in the environment. For example, it is highly recommended that you do not eat shark that is more than 1.5 m long as it is old enough to have accumulated harmful levels of mercury in its flesh. If eaten, the consumer will also accumulate the mercury. At least half of this heavy metal pollution has been attributable to the burning of fossil fuels, because coal and oil contain these and when burnt, they are released into the atmosphere along with carbon dioxide. Some ecologists are advocating the phasing out of fossil fuels primarily for this reason.
- In the future, food security will be of prime importance in Australia as it already is in the majority of the nations on Earth. With the prediction that the Food bowl areas of Australia (The Murray-Darling Basin) drying out in El Nino events and being flooded out in la Nina events, the need for food production in more reliable climate areas such as Gippsland will become increasingly greater. Sacrificing land for open-cuts now is simply short-sighted and against the national interest
- Compared to existing jobs in the established power industry, farming, forestry and the services sector, very few jobs will be created by open-cut mining. This is because of automation and remote control technology. These mines will increase on-going employment opportunities by the barest of margins.

- Once the land has been mined, it is good for nothing. There is no wealth generation possible on this land ever again. We are in effect robbing future generations of wealth generation potential.
- People have consciously chosen to live on the Gippsland Plains because of the environmental pleasantness and social atmosphere of small country towns, farms and farmlets. It is unfair on these people to have to put up with the industrial, noisy, dusty and polluting operations nearby or to have their land dispossessed to make way for the mine.
- It is also unfair that they be exposed to increasing levels of health reducing conditions in the environment near to where they live.
- With tourism prospects vastly decreased, it will be harder for people in these areas to attract tourists and to make a living.
- Open cuts are potentially hazardous places to live near and work in because of the inflammable nature of coal. Residents living near to an open-cut could be exposed to massive fires that may take days or weeks to control, with the resulting harmful smoke and dust in this period.
- There is a growing Green movement in most areas of Australia, particularly in the inner cities. The social licence that coal companies have to provide electricity and essential services is diminishing with this group of people as every advance in renewable energy technologies is announced. This social change needs to be noted.
- Gippslanders are increasingly unwilling to sacrifice land, landscape and wealth generation potential for the sake of a few jobs.
- Finally with the State Government encouraging the opening up of coal mining for export, it is just undoing any good that the Federal Government's carbon tax will have in reducing emissions. Either the Federal Government or the Victorian Government should levy an export tax at the same rate as the carbon tax - \$23 per tonne of CO₂ after allowing for carbon tax measures in the destination country, so as Australia cannot be accused of exporting our emissions over-seas.

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

Destroy the Land, Destroy the Wealth Generation Potential

- Mining, especially open cut mining is a one-use operation. You extract the mineral, get paid once for it and then the land is unable to be used again to generate wealth.
- The people who benefit from this operation are the company owners, who in the main are not local people and in all probability won't even be Australian. The only benefits for locals will be the few who are employed to run the operation and many of these will be brought in from elsewhere because of their expertise.
- It can be argued that the high Australian dollar is the main factor for the decline in our manufacturing and tourism sectors. The reason why our currency is high at the moment is because of the immense volume of our iron ore and coal exports. By encouraging more mining, we are just making the situation worse and the economic downturn that it will cause when the minerals run out will be worse.
- To open up new open-cuts in Gippsland will require billions of dollars in infrastructure at the operational sites and also with transporting it to ports, which will necessarily result in much disruption to local communities. There are signs that the demand for coal will ease in this coming decade and that demand for brown coal will not be there. Who would buy thermally inferior brown coal, when there is plenty of black coal available. China has signalled that it will cap imports of coal by 2015. India is progressing with solar thermal electricity generation at a great rate. Indonesia is

looking at ocean wave electricity generation on a large scale. It may be that the billions of dollars that get invested now will be a total waste in ten years time.

- Each year the McCalister Irrigation District generates about \$50 million from agriculture. If mined, then this is wealth, which will never be regained by the district.

Tourism

- Tourism has been an important and growing part of the wealth of Gippsland. Few people will be attracted to an area dominated by open-cut mines
- A lot of energy has been put into developing the Gippsland Plains Rail Trail. More mining will devastate those businesses and small towns that were relying on tourist income for their survival.
- With diversion of rivers and degraded water supply, the visual and ecological amenity of the area will be diminished and will turn tourists away.
- Much of Gippsland has been promoted as a gourmet Trail. It is impossible to promote this image with large scale polluting mining operations nearby.
- The dust and emissions from the mining operations have contaminated the air, soil and water in other locations where they are being carried out. The food produced from the farms nearby is consequently contaminated as well. For instance a Hunter Valley vineyard within eye-sight of an open cut coal mine produced wine with a diesel taint.

Population and Income

- People can't live in or close to mined land. There will be a de-population of the area as a whole. This will result in less rates being collected by local government and less tax collectable by state and Federal treasuries. Local businesses that support populations in the big centres such as Traralgon as well as those from outlying towns and farms will suffer income loss.
- A report from the Australia Institute has recently found that the mining boom in Queensland has resulted in a net job loss of between 10,000 and 30,000 because of the increasing dollar and the displacement of residents.

References:

CSIRO and BOM Climate Change 2-Yearly Report:

<http://www.csiro.au/Outcomes/Climate/Understanding/State-of-the-Climate-2012.aspx>

China capping coal imports by 2015:

<http://reneweconomy.com.au/2012/china-threatens-to-pierce-coal-export-bubble-47613>

India and coal future: <http://reneweconomy.com.au/2012/five-things-we-learned-this-week-38760>