

23 February 2013

The Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
P O Box 6100 Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senators

RE: Senate Committee Inquiry into the Impacts of Air Quality on Health

As a resident impacted by the poor air quality in the Hunter Valley, I respectfully request that your Committee convene in the Hunter Valley of NSW and choose a venue in the mid to Upper Hunter so that individuals and community groups, who have been increasingly suffering degradation of their communities and their environment and the detrimental health impacts of coal mining have the opportunity to present, in person, to members of the Committee.

Communities in the mid to Upper Hunter Valley areas suffer the most in NSW from the impacts caused by the rapidly expanding coal industry in our area. The Department of Health has documented the physical impacts and detrimental impacts on mental health, noise and air pollution, life expectancy and solastalgia have been documented by various authors.

There are numerous flawed planning processes involved with the approval of new mines, management of existing mines and the transportation of coal to Newcastle, which is the world's biggest exporter of coal. Over one hundred and twenty million tonnes of coal travel in uncovered rail wagons through our communities annually. This quantity is planned to increase. Should uncovered rail wagons continue, the increasing quantity of coal being transported to Newcastle will only multiply the already adverse health and social impacts on these communities.

When the Planning and Infrastructure Departments release plans for new mines, or mine extensions, coal seam gas drilling or new coal-fired power stations, the cumulative impacts on community health are never considered as an aspect of the overall assessment, demonstrating a critical lack of accountability, transparency and respect by the proponents to our coal ravaged Hunter Valley communities.

The submission made by the Department of Health to the Ashton South-East Open Cut coal mine outlines that there should be no more open cut mines allowed until there are closures of old mining areas. The ongoing, intensifying health impacts are echoed by local Medical Practitioners in our coal communities, who are seeing a growing number of children exhibiting severe symptoms of respiratory distress caused by mining related airborne debris, both in dust and vapour form, specifically.

The NSW Government recently announced that areas of high quality agricultural land or specialist agricultural pursuits will be quarantined from coal and coal seam gas exploration. No such consideration is given to protect the health and wellbeing of our Hunter Valley communities.

The cumulative health impacts on community members of coal mining in the Hunter Valley will be a major issue for the Inquiry. The intensifying push to extract as much coal as possible before exports opportunities begin to decline have only increased the alarm bells ringing in our communities and, in the face of mounting evidence of detrimental health impacts, Hunter Valley residents must be given convenient access to present to this Inquiry.

I note that on 5 February 2013, our Hunter MP, Joel Fitzgibbon said that holding a session of this Inquiry in the Hunter would create a 'media frenzy' and is against the Senate Committee visiting the Hunter Valley. I respectfully suggest that Hunter residents deserve their evidence to be heard in a way that is convenient for them and by not requiring them to take the increased time and inconvenience and make an increased contribution to greenhouse gas emissions of travelling to Canberra, as suggested by Mr Fitzgibbon.

I am able to personally attest to the impact of fine dust on my personal health and that of my pet bird. For 6 years we lived in the relatively clean air environment around Coffs Harbour. Over these years we made numerous visits to the Hunter Valley and both myself and my bird were sneezing for two to three days after returning to Coffs Harbour. Now that we have relocated to the Hunter, I sneeze daily and my bird sneezes when the weather is dry for long periods.

I, therefore, request that at least one Inquiry session be held in the Hunter Valley.

Sincerely

Aina M Ranke