

“Reclaiming our Valley”

Hunter Communities Network

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Submission

Senate Inquiry

The Impacts on Health of Air Quality in Australia

Friday 8 March 2013

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Introduction

The Hunter Communities Network is an alliance of community based groups and individuals impacted by the current coal industry and concerned about the ongoing rapid expansion of coal and coal seam gas exploration and mining in the region.

The communities are based in the Hunter Valley in New South Wales where the largest concentration of open cut coal mining occurs in proximity to human settlement in Australia.

There are approximately 10,000 ha of exposed soils, waste rock, coal stockpiles and fly ash dams in the Upper Hunter. The region generates over 40% of NSW coal-fired power and supplies the world's largest coal export facility at the Port of Newcastle.

210 million tonnes of coal was exported from Newcastle in 2012. This coal was transported on open coal wagons through towns, villages and densely populated city suburbs throughout the Hunter region.

The operation of over 30 large open cut coal mines on the floor of the Hunter Valley involves the combustion of millions of litres of diesel per annum and the detonation of over 100,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate explosives. The two large power stations produce large volumes of sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxide plus other toxic air pollutants.

The cumulative impact of these combined coal-related activities has produced a dangerous level of air pollution that has major health impacts on the residents of the region.

The NSW Department of Health has raised objections to new open cut coal mine proposals in the Upper Hunter. However, the projects continue to be approved on economic grounds. The people of the Hunter region have become collateral damage to the coal industry.

There has been no regional health study conducted in the Hunter Valley to monitor the impacts on human health of this level of constant exposure to a high concentration of air pollutants.

1. Evidence of Coal Dust Pollution

Households, parked vehicles, farm machinery, swimming pools, water tanks and other infrastructure in the Valley receive a constant coating of grey to black dust in proximity to mines and railway lines. In strong winds, the mine dust is carried many kilometres.

Keeping the house free of coal dust, especially white goods, is a constant struggle in the region.

The pollution of water tanks from dust settling on roofs is an ongoing concern of rural residents not connected to town water supply.

There is no protection of drinking water supply provided to rural people within the approvals process for large open cut coal mines.

2. Evidence of Health Impacts

There is a high level of asthma and respiratory disease amongst residents of the Hunter region, especially amongst children. A constant 'coal' cough is a regular symptom displayed. There are also clusters of cancer sufferers and other rare and unusual diseases.

The community has been demanding a regional health study for many years with no serious response from the Government.

3. Lack of regulation and compliance

Because of pressure from the community the previous NSW Government established a regional air quality monitoring network in the Upper Hunter (UHAQMN) with 14 monitoring stations measuring PM₁₀ and three measuring PM_{2.5} in addition.

Each mining operation also has a set of conditions to monitor dust emissions on the site.

The UHAQMN has regularly measured dust levels above the national standard. The Environment Protection Authority is the main regulator of air pollution and issues pollution licences.

The EPA has attempted to introduce a Pollution Reduction Program to better manage dust emissions from open cut coal mines across the state. However, nothing has been done to prevent severe dust pollution on days of high wind, high temperatures and dry conditions.

There are very few instances of mining companies being regulated for non compliance of licenced conditions.

The community has to take on the role of watch dog, which is a mammoth task with the scale and intensity of the mining operations in the Upper Hunter.

Meanwhile the industry is continuing to put expansion proposals to the NSW Government and all appear to be approved despite the clear impacts on the environment and human health.

4. Recommendation

Hunter Communities Network recommends that the Senate Committee tour the Hunter Valley to obtain a first-hand experience of the scale of the mining operations and their impacts.

The Network would appreciate the opportunity to present further evidence to the Inquiry at a hearing in the Hunter region.

Bev Smiles
Convenor