

**Initial comments by Rivers SOS
on the
NSW Dept of Planning's Strategic Review entitled**

***Inquiry into the impacts of longwall mining on natural features in the
Southern Coalfield***

The Rivers SOS Alliance is working to co-ordinate a detailed response to the Panel of Experts' Report, released on 10 July, stemming from their Inquiry into the impacts of longwall mining on natural features in the Southern Coalfield, especially water sources.

The Rivers SOS committee is taking time to co-ordinate comments from its 40 groups before making a formal response, but we agree that committee members who have been analyzing the Report are able to make individual responses. This is because BHP Billiton, and other groups, have already sent out media releases and we felt the need for some preliminary input from Rivers SOS members.

So, Caroline Graham, Public Liaison Officer for Rivers SOS, comments:

“Rivers, wells and bores around the planet are drying up and/or becoming polluted through over-use, misuse and increasing drought. Several of the world's major rivers no longer reach the sea: the Nile, the Yellow River, the Colorado, the Rio Grande, the Jordan, the Oxus and now the Murray among them. Groundwater is being pumped out faster than it can be replenished. Wetlands are being desiccated. Perhaps nothing matters more to humanity than the fate of our rivers.

Rivers are sacred to most religions: Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims revere rivers. Jesus was baptised in the Jordan. Rivers run abundantly in the Muslim paradise. In Australia, Aboriginals hold rivers, waterholes and billabongs to be sacred places, manifestations of the dreamtime creation process. Near Douglas Park in the Southern Coalfield, there is a sacred waterhole and waterfall in the Cataract river where, for thousands of years, spirits were ceremonially summonsed by tribal shamans, according to Ellen Anderson's account in *Australian Legends*, 1925. The Cataract River is now irreparably damaged by longwall mining (see our DVD *Rivers of Shame 2*, and photos of cracking and pollution in the Report itself).

I hoped very much that this panel of five experts, who were given the task of reporting on mine impacts on our local river systems, would be attuned to the cataclysm facing rivers and water resources, especially in the driest continent, and that protection of river systems would naturally be their highest priority.

Surely the Panel would find it unacceptable to sanction mining which continues to crack and pollute our water resources, our lovely rivers, creeks and wetlands, especially in the drinking water catchments. Sydney, Wollongong and Macarthur's drinking water comes from the supposedly highly protected catchments which form a large part of the Southern Coalfield area examined by the Panel. (20% of Sydney's water is from this region, 80% from Warragamba dam).

Sadly, although they acknowledge mine damage to water quality and quantity, the Panel failed to recommend protection of the rivers, creeks and wetlands. Instead they make do with a call for more

monitoring and risk assessment in these significant zones, leaving it up to the “government” to make a final decision on mine approval. This is pretty much what happens now: the government is presented with all sorts of damage predictions in submissions from the public, and even from consultants employed by the mining corporations, but the government for the most part goes ahead and approves the mine plans anyway.

The Report does call for risk assessments to be reviewed by “independent experts” which is a step in the right direction, however when government agencies like the Sydney Catchment Authority have in the past employed independent experts to give advice, the government has ignored the advice, as in the case of the Upper Cataract mines which have now cracked the river bed.

It is no accident that four of the five academics on the Panel do consultancy work for the mining corporations, although this was touted as an “independent inquiry” (e.g. on p.1 of the Report). In their recommendations, they are just doing as might be expected: taking care of business. The people of NSW should insist that such panels should include experts who are truly independent. While most mining academics and geologists earn from consultancies with the mining corporations, meaning that true independents are hard to find, with a little extra effort the government could employ uncompromised retirees and/or experts from overseas to balance such industry-weighted panels. (One or two informed individuals from the area, with intimate knowledge of the area, should also be on such panels. The expert panel made fleeting visits to some of the damaged rivers but this is no substitute for seasonal and long-term observation).

Though just an informed layperson, I had no trouble finding an overseas expert, who has given advice to us in the past and now gave me an opinion on the Report. This is Dr Ben Stout, a leading US biologist and stream ecologist, who has published extensive research on the impacts of longwall mining on streams in West Virginia.

I attach/will forward Dr Stout’s comments.

To sum up: in my personal opinion this Inquiry was a gross waste of public money, in which the all-important opportunity to mandate protection of our river systems has been lost.

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