

8 March 2013

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

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY ON THE HEALTH IMPACTS OF AIR QUALITY IN AUSTRALIA

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Senate Inquiry on the impacts on health of air quality in Australia.

This submission addresses my concerns about air quality issues associated with coal transport and storage around the Port of Newcastle.

I have lived in Tighes Hill, Newcastle, since 1982. Tighes Hill is a coal-affected community adjacent to the freight rail line that runs along the northern boundary of Tighes Hill to service Port Waratah Coal Service's Carrington coal loader facility (25Mtpa capacity), and a few hundred metres south-west of PWCS's coal stockpiles. The closest houses in Tighes Hill are less than 200m south of the nearest PWCS Carrington coal stockpiles (see map in Figure 1 below). My house (which is pretty much in the centre of Tighes Hill) is approximately 500m south-west of the nearest stockpile, and 400m from the rail line.

My family and I experience constant air and noise pollution from these sources, with accumulated dust evident on pretty much any surface exposed for any significant length of time to normal atmospheric conditions (windows, built structures, hanging clothes, etc). Pollution is noticeably greater when the wind is blowing from a northerly and north-easterly direction (i.e., the direction of the freight rail line and coal stockpiles). The even larger coal transport and storage operations of Kooragang Island are 3-4km to the north of Tighes Hill (see Figure 2).

During the time I have lived in Tighes Hill, I have been actively involved in the community in a range of local issues, including air quality. I can confirm that, while local community concern about this issue has ebbed and flowed at different times over these three decades, it has been a recurrent focus of local concern and discussion. During the 1980s and '90s, this concern was primarily focussed on pollution from the now former BHP steelworks. This concern subsided after the steelworks closed in 1999. The review of the Newcastle Airshed Management Plan (NCC, 2003) noted a 30% reduction in the level of fine particulate matter monitored at NCC's monitoring stations at Mayfield and Stockton following the closure of BHP's Newcastle steelworks (Newcastle City Council, NAMP, 2002, p.1,

[http://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/5556/Newcastle\\_Airshed\\_Management\\_Action\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/5556/Newcastle_Airshed_Management_Action_Plan.pdf), accessed 5 March 2013. The improvement in local air quality was immediately observable for local residents. However, concern has gradually re-emerged since then

with the increase of coal exports through the Port of Newcastle, to the extent that it is now back on top of the public policy agenda for Tighes Hill residents and other nearby coal-affected communities. I am currently an active member of the Tighes Hill Community Group (THCG), which has represented the interests of Tighes Hill residents since 2009. Concern about air quality was one of the motivations for forming THCG, and through THCG's organisational and community meetings and forums, strategic planning sessions, etc, Tighes Hill residents are once again regularly identifying local air quality as their no.1 concern. An Air Quality Working Group was one of the first sub-groups established by THCG, and this group remains active, regularly participating in structured discussions organised by the community, government agencies or local industries on air quality issues.



Figure 1: Location of Tighes Hill in relation to coal freight line and PWCS Carrington Coal Loader

As a result of local concerns about the potential impacts of current proposals to significantly escalate coal exports through the Port of Newcastle, THCG also became a foundation member of Newcastle's community-based Coal Terminal Action Group (CTAG), which formed a Dust and Health Steering Group that initiated the recently released dust and health study of coal affected communities, which drew on independently collected air quality data and on the assistance of various health and air quality experts. One of the monitoring stations used for collecting the air quality data for this study was located in the street in which I live (Henry St). The study (released yesterday, see <http://www.hcec.org.au/sites/default/files/CoalDustMonitoringStudyFull.pdf#overlay-context=20130307/testing-finds-coal-dust-levels-top-national-standards-5-days-7>) found that Tighes Hill experienced elevated levels of particulate pollution, with exceedances well above national air quality safety standards on 5 out of 7 days (see <http://www.hcec.org.au/20130307/testing-finds->



[coal-dust-levels-top-national-standards-5-days-7](#)). This confirms what Tighes Hill residents have suspected for some time based on first-hand experience and observation.

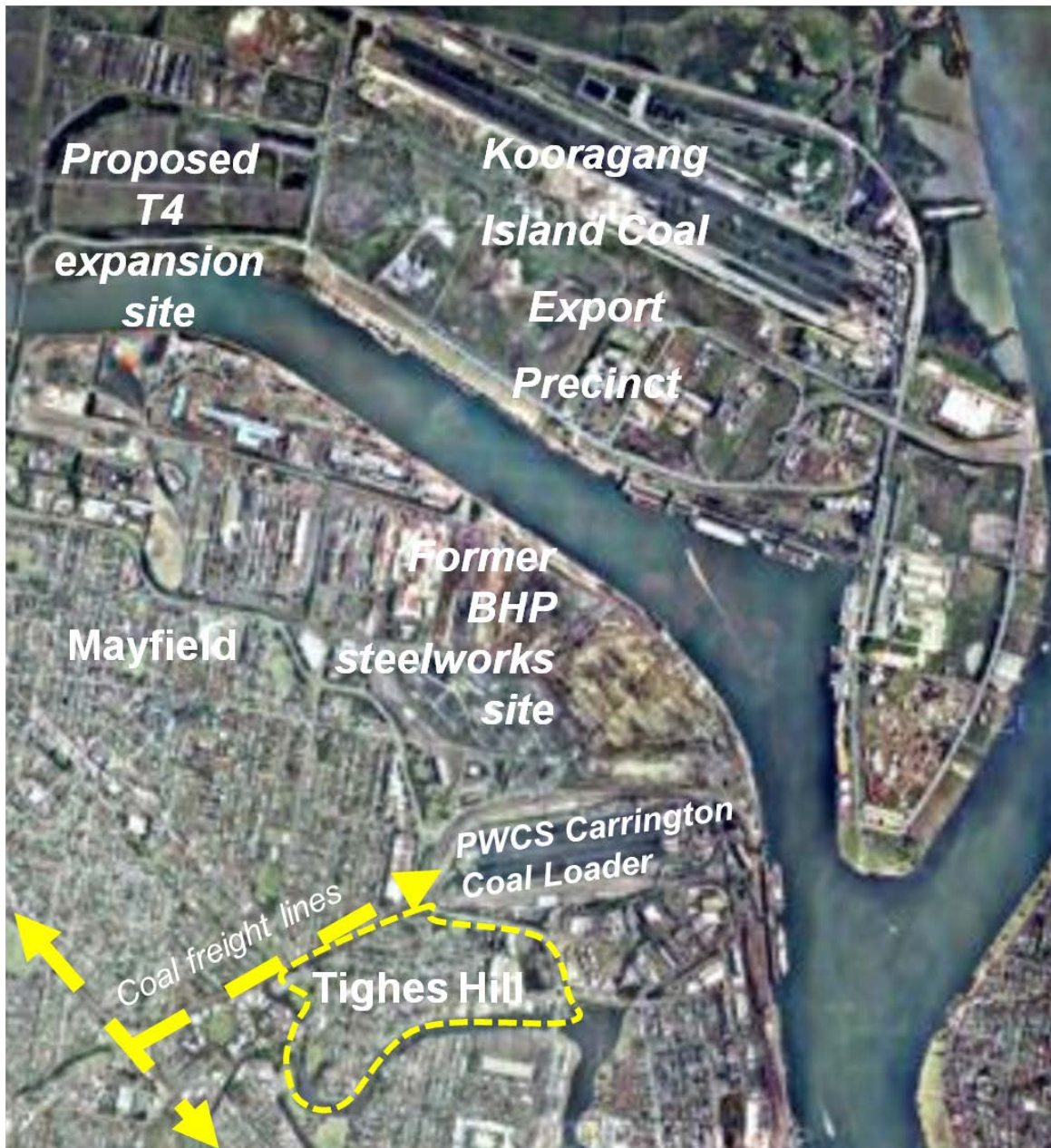


Figure 2: Map of Tighes Hill relative to existing and proposed Port coal operations

I also served as a Newcastle councillor from 1991 to 1999, during which time I was appointed to Newcastle Council's Environmental Protection and Pollution Advisory Committee (EPAPAC), which provided a forum for discussion between representatives of industry, government agencies, local elected representatives and the community. Air quality was the *raison d'être* and key focus of this Committee. I was actively involved in the Committee's work, including in its role in monitoring and discussing air quality data in the Newcastle local government area, and in bringing relevant recommendations to the elected council. The committee secured council support for the groundbreaking Newcastle Airshed Management Action Plan, which was completed by Associate Professor Howard Bridgeman, from the University of Newcastle, in 1998. EPAPAC also played a

central role during the 1990s in discussions about the impact of fine particulate pollution ( $<PM_{10}$ ) when concerns about the potential health effects of such particles first emerged. Through EPAPAC, Newcastle Council initiated research in this area by the Commonwealth Government's Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO), that provided baseline data on local fine particulate pollution, and particularly ultra-fine ( $< PM_{2.5}$ ) particles. This research has continued to the present (results can be found in various forms and locations on the ANSTO website, e.g.: [http://www.ansto.gov.au/research/institute\\_of\\_environmental\\_research/science/accelerator\\_science/ion\\_beam\\_analysis/publicationspostersbrochures](http://www.ansto.gov.au/research/institute_of_environmental_research/science/accelerator_science/ion_beam_analysis/publicationspostersbrochures)). One of the ANSTO monitoring stations is at Mayfield, a suburb adjacent to Tighes Hill, and results from this station show elevated levels of particulate pollution on a number of occasions. However, the ANSTO data is difficult to access for ordinary members of the public due to release delays, and to difficulties associated with data presentation and location.

When I retired as a councillor in 1999, I maintained a watching brief on local air quality issues, but was not centrally involved in such matters, and I was struck when I participated in a local community consultation session held last year by the NSW Government's Newcastle Community Consultative Committee on the Environment (NCCCE) by how little apparent progress appears to have been made over the intervening decade in building on the groundwork provided by these initial efforts. Despite the escalation of coal extraction and transport throughout the Hunter, and the many calls by local coal affected communities over the past decade, there is still no comprehensive independent study of the health effects of coal (and especially of associated fine and ultra-fine particulate pollution) on local communities, and very little progress in improving the monitoring or regulation of coal pollution, or any systematic independent examination of the full social and environmental costs of coal. Even calls for simple, basic actions such as covering coal wagons to reduce "fugitive" dust emissions have not been implemented. In response to calls from the Mayfield, Islington and Tighes Hill communities for the construction of a port-side freight rail line to service the PWCS Carrington Coal Loader and the future development of port related industries on BHP's former Mayfield steelworks site, and to relocate some coal freight transport away from residential areas, the Newcastle Port Corporation admitted at a recent public forum that they had come to the view that such a project was not feasible without even conducting a cost-benefit analysis of the proposal. It's easy to see why local communities have come to the view that their concerns are not taken seriously by government.

From a policy equity point of view, this is an indictment of the failure of successive governments (especially state, and, to a lesser extent, federal and local) to protect local coal-affected communities (such as Tighes Hill), and of the extent to which government policy has prioritised the vested interests of coal companies over the health and environments of local communities.

The prevailing view in such communities is that the health and environmental impacts of coal dust are given much lower priority by both state and federal governments than the profit interests of powerful coal companies, in both planning decisions related to coal developments (and other large industries), and in the ongoing regulation of these industries by government. Partly as a result of this, there is a widespread and deep-seated crisis of confidence among the Tighes Hill community regarding the ability and willingness of both industry and government to seriously address air quality concerns. The perception is that government regulatory agencies (especially the NSW EPA) are

inadequately resourced for the proper performance of their public interest role, and are often either covered or captured by the industries that they are meant to regulate.

To be credible, air quality monitoring and regulation must be rigorous, independent and transparent, and agencies must adopt user-friendly structures and processes to facilitate and track community air quality complaints. The Tighes Hill Community Group has previously advocated a "one-stop-shop" approach to local air quality monitoring and managing community complaints about pollution, and for real-time website air quality data and complaint tracking.

In my experience, Tighes Hill residents also tend to have little faith in industry self-monitoring (or the data obtained from it), or in forms of industry self-regulation on air quality. Over the past decade, we have heard claims made by industry representatives at various community and public meetings to the effect that:

1. coal dust is harmless and has no detrimental health effects, and
2. most of the dust that people and air quality monitors identify in areas near coal facilities does not come from those facilities.

Most people with whom I have contact in the Tighes Hill and the wider Newcastle community give such claims little credence, partly because they know that they are not based on independent research or evidence. We have also directly experienced misleading information and refusals to provide relevant information from local industry, especially in relation to coal pollution and health, and the proposed expansion of coal export facilities (I am happy to provide details to substantiate this, if requested).

In addition to being a long-term Tighes Hill resident, I am also a parent, grandparent and global citizen, with an interest and commitment to intergenerational equity. As a generally proud Australian, I am concerned that the non-renewable resources of my country are being burnt and exported in a way that makes a substantial contribution to climate change, and that Australian governments (state and federal) have failed to take adequate responsibility or action on this wider dimension of air pollution. I know many other residents of Tighes Hill and the wider Newcastle community share this concern, in addition to their concerns about the local impacts of the pollution to which we are directly exposed by this industry.

The time is long overdue for governments to look beyond the vested interests of the coal industry to the wider public interest.

This submission therefore supports:

- 1) suspending consideration of further expansion of coal export facilities through the Port of Newcastle pending:
  - a) a rigorous, comprehensive and independent study of the health impacts of coal on affected communities, and
  - b) a holistic cost/benefit analysis of the coal industry (including its associated health and environmental costs).

- 2) more comprehensive and independent air quality monitoring of affected communities along the Hunter coal chain, and particle characterisation studies to identify point sources of pollution (especially for fine and ultra-fine particulates).
- 3) establishing a "one-stop-shop" pollution monitoring, regulation and complaints management system, with real-time publicly accessible online monitoring data and complaint tracking.
- 4) immediate implementation of relatively simple coal dust pollution abatement measures, such as covering (or veneering) coal wagons and coal stockpiles to suppress fugitive dust emissions.
- 5) cost-benefit analyses of potential transport infrastructure projects (such as a port-side rail line through the former BHP Mayfield site and the Newcastle western freight by-pass) that would both reduce the impact of coal transport through affected residential areas and build capacity for economic diversification of the Port of Newcastle.

Given the local concern about this issue, I also request - and strongly recommend - that the Committee hold at least one hearing in the Newcastle or Lower Hunter area to hear directly from relevant community members and stakeholder groups.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I hope that the Senate Inquiry provides a significant contribution to addressing the legitimate concerns of coal-affected communities about the health impacts of coal.

I would be happy to provide any further information relevant to this submission that might assist the Inquiry. My contact details are provided under separate cover.

Yours sincerely

John Sutton

8 March 2013.