

Hunter Environment Lobby Inc. submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry into the Impacts of Air Quality on Health

to

Secretary Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs,
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Hunter Environment Lobby (HEL) is a regional non-profit, non-political community organisation which has been active in the Hunter and surrounding areas for over twenty years by making submissions on coal and other developments, holding community forums and working with coal affected communities.

Hunter Environment Lobby Inc respectfully asks that this Committee convene in the Hunter Valley in NSW so that community groups who are currently suffering under a burden of isolation, degradation of their communities and environments and the health impacts of coal mining especially, can present in person to the members of this Committee.

We ask that you especially choose a venue in the mid to Upper Hunter so that the Committee may make a real effort to hear representatives of those communities who suffer the most in NSW from health impacts caused by the coal industry. Those impacts are well documented by Department of Health data in the case of physical impacts. There are also many other impacts on mental health, life expectancy, noise pollution and solastalgia (Dr. Glenn Albrechts work in the Hunter).

HEL would like to comment that there are many flawed processes that have led to the situation we find ourselves in by being residents of the Hunter Valley, which is the world's biggest exporter of coal, over one hundred and twenty million tonnes per annum (MTPA), which travels by rail through our communities. The planning process in particular is one such issue that the community has found to be quite problematic.

The community has heard over time that areas of high agricultural quality or specialist agricultural pursuits will be ring-fenced or quarantined from coal and coal seam gas exploration, but we find no such process to protect the health and well being of our community members.

When new or extended plans for coal, coal seam gas or coal fired power stations are submitted to the community to comment by the Planning and Infrastructure Departments, the cumulative impacts on health especially are never outlined as a tool that communities may use to assess overall impacts. This issue especially shows a critical lack of transparency and accountability to our coal ravaged communities.

The cumulative effects of coal mining in particular, on the health of our Upper and mid Hunter residents is the driving issue and major challenge that this Standing Committee will face. We see that the NSW Department of Health's own submission into Ashton South East Open Cut coal mine development outlines that there should be no more open cut mines allowed until there are closures of old mining areas.

The alarm bells in our community have been ringing aloud long before we sighted this submission, but it fortifies our resolve that the ongoing health effects on our communities are intensifying, and that there must be a circuit breaker to alleviate the growing concerns. The growing concerns are echoed by local medical practitioners in our Hunter coal fields who see especially children exhibiting severe symptoms of

respiratory distress caused by specific impacts of mining related airborne debris, both in dust and vapour form.

Over the past year we have seen ongoing alerts by the dust monitors that have been placed around the Hunter in strategic areas to measure air quality. Mainly these monitors measure particle size, and disturbing readings have been seen in our communities over many months. The impacts on well being from this issue are immense, not only on physical but mental health.

Imagine for yourselves the impacts on households who feel that they can never again keep their houses clean and dust free, for the sake of their children's health, and imagine the anxiety that people have about ever being able to sell this property when effects become too overwhelming.

I can vouch for the impacts it has on health in that in my own case, when I leave the Hunter Valley at times of high dust pollution, my cough improves, and like many other friends and acquaintances, that cough returns when I return to the Valley.

The communities of the Hunter deserve to have their say in this Inquiry, and we ask that you make it a little easier for them to do that adequately by holding at least one session here in the Hunter Valley.

Thanking you in advance,
Jan Davis
President, Hunter Environment Lobby Inc.