

Mine air pollution breaches safety limits

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Air pollution caused by the mines surrounding a Hunter Valley village sometimes exceeds safe guidelines, potentially causing health risks, an independent review commissioned by the NSW government has found.

But the government maintained the review of mining's impact on air, noise and drinking water in the village of Camberwell showed that pollution was generally within safe limits and there was no cause for public concern.

The Planning Minister, Tony Kelly, said the government would launch further studies to assess the impact of mining on health, and more closely scrutinise future mining proposals.

A cabinet sub-committee containing five ministers would look at the cumulative effects of mining in NSW, he said. He would also meet Camberwell residents. "The idea is to give certainty to the communities as well as the mining companies," he said.

The review - a series of reports by environmental consultants - found high levels of dust particles at times when mining was taking place around Camberwell, and said these "suspended particulate concentrations" could be expected to grow more intense if current mining expansion proposals were approved.

"Given the controlling influence of local coalmining emissions on suspended particulate concentrations, changes in mining activities are indicative of potential changes in future air quality within Camberwell," the report says.

It found that dust levels peaked above safe guidelines in Camberwell, but when averaged out over a year they fell below the minimum considered to pose a risk. Noise levels caused by explosions and mining

trucks were high but fell below agreed limits in most cases, and there was no evidence that lead from mines has infiltrated the drinking water supply at dangerous levels.

The state's Chief Health Officer, Dr Kerry Chant, said the health impact of air pollution was an "emerging area" and she had established an expert panel to advise her. "Particulate pollution does impact on health," she said. "We don't walk away from that. It can cause exacerbations of asthma. It can lead to cardiovascular disease. "

The NSW Minerals Council said it welcomed the cabinet sub-committee and the findings of the review.

"Given that the mining projects are likely to expand ... we need to look at the cumulative impacts of mining," the council's chief executive, Nikki Williams, said.

"If the mining industry continues to expand, then in some areas it may no longer comply - individual mines may but cumulatively it may not comply. Therefore it is important to look at ... new standards, potentially, to ensure you do protect the health of communities where we work."

Camberwell, 12 kilometres north of Singleton, is "surrounded by mining operations", the report says. There are 56 homes in the village, most of which have been bought by the mining industry.

The NSW Greens said Camberwell had been "ravaged" by mining. "Fine particulate standards are breached on up to 9 per cent of days a year, and predicted to rise in future," the Greens MP Lee Rhiannon said.

HIGH COST OF WEALTH

March 19: A *Herald* investigation exposes the high cost on health of the coal mining industry in the Hunter Valley.

April 22: Expert panel to be set up by government to monitor health effects of pollution.

May 22: A government report finds residents near coalmines and power stations are at greater risk of chronic disease and premature death.

May 28: The government accelerates the construction of coal dust monitoring stations.

Monday: It is revealed mining proposals worth \$1 billion in the Hunter are on hold pending air quality assessments