

Is our Shire's water supply under threat?

A vital part of our Shire's water supply is already suffering from longwall coal mining close to Woronora Dam – and worse is proposed!

Longwall mining is now widely recognised as the cause of damaging subsidence problems, especially in Greater Sydney's water catchment areas. This extensive form of mining leads to rock-cracks and land-collapses in the ground above.

Metropolitan Colliery is proposing to extend the longwall mining it is currently doing under Waratah Rivulet and under the Woronora Dam storage itself. The Rivulet provides a third of the Woronora's water. Along sections of the Rivulet the water already disappears into rock-cracks.

A number of streams above other NSW longwall mines have run dry due to mine-related surface cracking. So the threat to our Woronora water supply is obvious.

Our Shire's excellent water supply – nearly all of it from Woronora Dam – is now under threat from two sides: on one side, State Government says it will locate a huge desalination plant on Kurnell if dam levels fall below 30% (now 35%); on the other it looks likely to sanction this latest longwall mining proposal that will diminish the capacity of the Woronora catchment.



A collapsed rock bar on Waratah Rivulet – the red stain on the rock slab indicates the extent of former pristine flows prior to longwall coal mining under this stream. PHOTO: KEITH MUIR

Damage to drinking water catchments exposed

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THE Waratah Rivulet, a stream that used to provide a third of the water to the Woronora Dam, has ceased flowing due to structural damage caused by underground coal mining. The Dam supplies the Sutherland Shire and Helensburgh with drinking water. The rivulet, which is within the Woronora Special Catchment Area, until recently had contained pristine pools hundreds of metres long and up to three metres deep. Since being mined these pools are sandy hollows surrounded by rocky bars, covered with many transverse cracks over which the stream once flowed.

Dave Burgess of Total Environment Centre, who inspected the stream with me last November, reported that the riverbed is cracked in hundreds of places and drained to a point where it now runs dry... "While other rivers and streams in the area are running well, the Waratah Rivulet is bone dry for nearly 2km of its length," he said.

Waratah Rivulet has been subjected to intensive longwall coal mining over the last three years by the Metropolitan Colliery. The mining has destroyed the stream's ability to effectively collect and transmit water. The colliery is currently owned by Peabody Energy, the world's largest coal mining company.

The cracking of the streambed of Waratah Rivulet is not an isolated incident. It is similar to the

damage in other parts of the water supply catchment that has been subjected to longwall coal mining. Five years ago, I blew the whistle on similar extensive damage of Wongawilli and Native Dog Creeks in the important Metropolitan water supply catchment further to the south. Cliff falls and major surface cracking have also been reported at the Dendrobium Colliery also in the Metropolitan Catchment Area.

The Lemna Government needs to direct its mining engineers to give priority to catchment preservation before coal extraction. More coal needs to be retained to prevent the surface movements that have caused the stream bed cracking and water pollution in the drinking water catchments. It is vital that protection zones are applied across all drinking

water supply catchments.

If we allow the coal mining damage to continue, we will need more than a desalination plant to secure adequate water resources. Our formerly pristine water supply catchments south of Sydney are an irreplaceable resource. The Metropolitan and Woronora catchments are situated above the Illawarra Escarpment that receives the most reliable rainfalls in the Sydney region. Fresh, pure water from these catchments must not be polluted or diminished by coal mining if a major water supply crisis is to be averted.

The Government's limp response of calling an inquiry ignores the seriousness of the problem and apparently seeks to defer any extra control on mining until after 2010. Deferral of action will only make the coming crisis worse. A moratorium on mining approvals must come into immediate effect, and operate until mining companies agree to stronger controls that are needed to prevent damage to our drinking water catchments.

The independent inquiry into underground coal mining in the southern coalfield stretching from Sydney to the Southern Highlands, which was announced by the NSW Government on December 6th, is likely to be a whitewash. The terms of references do not even mention the water supply catchments.

On announcing the inquiry Planning Minister, Mr Frank Sartor said that from 2010 all proposed extensions to underground coal mining leases would require approval under Part 3A of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979.

So the inquiry will have no immediate benefit.

The directions of the Minister for Primary Industries, Ian Macdonald, to the inquiry's panel of experts appears to suggest he is more concerned with employment and the State's economy than stopping coal mining related damage to essential water supplies.

Essentially the inquiry has been asked to trade off environment protection with the social and economic importance of coal mining. The inquiry has not been given directions about the paramount importance of catchment protection.

The claim that the inquiry will provide a sound technical foundation for the assessment and long term management of underground mining in the southern coalfield is misleading. The inquiry is lacking leadership to ensure water supplies are preserved. I expect that the inquiry will vindicate current intensive underground coal mining practices and discount the damage being caused to water catchments.

Only one decision needs to be made; and that is how best to preserve the specially protected drinking water catchments from the spoiling effects of coal mining. The Government must act to ensure that the pristine waters of our drinking water catchments will flow unabated and unpolluted forever.

Meanwhile Peabody Energy intend to lodge a proposal in 2007 to mine under further reaches of the Waratah Rivulet and under the Woronora Dam itself. Elsewhere destructive longwall mining operations continue unabated. ■



This empty channel is all that's left of a three metre deep pool on Waratah Rivulet following recent longwall mining operations. PHOTO: KEITH MUIR