

“Reclaiming our Valley”

Hunter Communities Network

POEO (HRSTS) Regulation Review
Reform and Compliance Branch
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SUBMISSION

Draft amendment regulation Hunter River Salinity Trading Scheme

The Hunter Communities Network (HCN) is an alliance of community based groups and individuals impacted by the current coal industry and concerned about the ongoing rapid expansion of coal and coal seam gas exploration and mining in the region.

The people of the Hunter Region are greatly concerned about the long term health of the Hunter River system and the lack of a regional cumulative impact assessment of the current coal mining operations.

While we recognise that the introduction of the Hunter River Salinity Trading Scheme (HRSTS) in 2002 was a major step forward in controlling the impacts of mine water discharge, we also note that a significant expansion of the industry has occurred since that time.

In the Goulburn River tributary:

- The Wilpinjong Mine was approved in 2006 and has had six subsequent modifications and expansions of mining operations. An additional expansion to disturb a further 800 ha of catchment area is currently on exhibition.
- The Moolarben Mine was approved in 2007 with Stage 2 approved in 2014.
- The Ulan mine was approved to double production and extend open cut and underground operations in 2010
- The Bylong Mine is currently under consideration by the Department of Planning and Environment

The cumulative impact of these very large scale mining operations on the headwaters of the Goulburn River have not been assessed.

In the 2010 high rainfall event, the Environment Protection Licences for the three operating mines were turned off and uncontrolled mine water discharge was allowed for a period of 6 months into The Goulburn River catchment. This would have had a major impact on the salinity levels entering the Hunter system at Denman.

In the upper river sector:

- A large extension of the Bengalla Mine has been approved
- A large extension of the Mt Arthur mine has been approved
- Mangoola Mine has been modified to allow mine discharge into the river
- The Mt Pleasant mine modification was approved. New owners are preparing to commence the project
- Muswellbrook West proposal is being developed
- Dartbrook Mine is proposed to be re developed as an open cut operation.

Numerous other large mine expansions have also been approved in the middle and lower river sectors while others are currently in the planning system such as the Mt Owen and Rix's Creek expansions.

The cumulative impact on the Hunter River system of these major mining expansions in that last 10 years and of those proposed has not been assessed.

HCN notes that the cumulative impact assessment as proposed under the Independent Expert Scientific Committee Hunter bioregional assessment process is yet to be conducted.

There is also concern that discharges into tributaries under the HRSTS often continue beyond any high flow pulse. Improved monitoring of mine discharge must be undertaken.

If the HRSTS is to continue playing a successful role in managing salinity levels in the Hunter River then the regulation must be tightened to encompass the increased impacts from mine expansion.

HCN wishes to make the following recommendations on the draft amendment regulation:

1. Amendment to Clause 11 - Flow blocks

HCN recommends the following amendments to Clause 11:

- The levels of flow in the low flow block be lifted to 1,200 ML/day in the upper sector, 2,000 ML/day in the middle sector and 2,500 ML/day in the lower sector.
- All references to flood flow blocks are removed from the clause thus requiring salinity credits to be used for all mine water discharges in flows above the low flow block.
- No mine discharge to be allowable in the low flow block under any exempt circumstances.

2. Amendment to Clause 26

HCN recommends that Clause 26 be removed from the regulation thus removing the flood flow exemption.

3. Amendment to Clause 84

HCN recommends that Clause 84 be amended to

- remove the reduction in total contributions if the credit sales exceeds the total cost of the scheme.
- allow proceeds of credit sales of any auction or other sale of credits to be invested in research and monitoring of river health.

Conclusion

HCN considers that no mine waste water should be discharged into the Hunter River without the application of a load based licence. The recommended amendments to the salinity trading scheme regulation will help to improve river health and resilience in the context of continued expansion of large scale coal mining operations in the catchment.

The long term viability of the river system is critical for other industries and water users.

A strengthened regulation will provide improved protection for the Hunter River and the people who depend on it.