

POEO (HRSTS) Regulation Review
Reform and Compliance Branch
Environment Protection Authority

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Submission to Review of the Protection of the Environment Operations (Hunter River Salinity Trading Scheme) Regulation 2002

NCC welcomes the opportunity to comment on the issues raised in the discussion paper regarding the Review of the Protection of the Environment Operations (Hunter River Salinity Trading Scheme) Regulation 2002 ('the Review').

NCC has had a long interest in the management of the Hunter River system and the long term impacts of the expanding coal mining industry.

It is of great concern that the background report provided by the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), *Hunter Catchment Salinity Assessment*, has exposed the major limitations in the current monitoring and assessment of river health and function in the Hunter region.

In the context of the proposed rapid expansion of both open-cut and longwall mining projects across the region, NCC considers it imperative that the Hunter River Salinity Trading Scheme ('the Scheme') not be compromised in any way.

NCC fully supports the conclusion in the OEH report that the salinity targets for the Scheme, 600 EC at Denman and 900 EC at the confluence of Glennies Creek and at Singleton should not be raised.

It is of great interest that the Cardno Ecology Lab Pty Ltd (2010) study on effects of mine water salinity on freshwater biota found that discharge waters from mines in the Hunter and Illawarra/Macarthur regions induced deleterious responses in a range of aquatic biota.

It is concerning that mine discharge water has been found to contain high levels of sodium bicarbonate and some levels of aluminium, nickel, zinc, cobalt and copper

exceeding the ANZECC/ARMCANZ (2000) guidelines for the protection of aquatic ecosystems.

NCC supports the conclusion that by simply focusing on total dissolved solids (TSS) or electrical conductivity (EC) does not allow for the effects of discharges of differing ionic composition or other contaminants.

The health of macroinvertebrate communities in the Hunter River system has been found to be quite poor in some areas, for example the Hunter Regulated River Alluvial Zone and Bowman's Creek. It is of concern that a number of scientific studies suggest that saline discharges can potentially have impacts on macroinvertebrate communities at conductivity levels similar to or well below those currently being discharged by the Scheme participants.

NCC recommends that the Review consider lowering the salinity target at Glennies Creek confluence and at Singleton and implementing improved licencing for pollutants in mine and power station discharge water.

NCC fully supports the proposal in the discussion paper to amend the Regulation to remove the flood flow exemption. All discharges of mine and power station water into the Hunter River system should require the use of salinity credits.

The suggestion to change the definition of 'high flows' to allow discharges at lower flow rates is strongly opposed because it will compromise the integrity of the Scheme and the reliance on dilution to dissipate the impacts of increased salt and pollutant loads.

NCC is greatly concerned that there is not a comprehensive and representative groundwater monitoring program across the Hunter catchment. This is vital information required to assess the cumulative impact of mining operations in the region.

NCC recommends that surplus revenue generated through the regular auction of salinity credits be invested in improved monitoring and assessment programs, particularly in areas of intensive mining operations and proposed expansions.

Sincerely,



Katherine Smolski
Campaigns Director