



Previously rejected Anglo American coal project wins NSW govt backing

HANNESBURG (miningweekly.com) – The previously rejected Anglo American Drayton South coal project has received backing from the New South Wales Department of Planning and Environment, angering horse breeders in the Hunter Valley, who are opposed to the opencut mine expansion.

The Planning Department has recommended that the independent Planning Assessment Commission (PAC), which previously rejected the expansion, approve the project.

The PAC has blocked the project three times, with its latest rejection in November 2015 on the basis that mining and horse-breeding activities were not compatible in close proximity. As a result, Anglo American has announced the closure of its existing Drayton operation by the end of September this year.

However, a Planning Department spokesperson said in a statement on Monday that its latest assessment had found that coal mining and thoroughbred stud industries had operated as neighbours for decades and that they could continue to do so.

“Based on independent reports, new evidence, and considering the proposed mine now complies with the PAC’s original minimum setback by remaining behind two natural ridgelines on the site, the department has concluded that, with appropriate management and mitigation measures, the two industries can continue to operate in proximity,” the spokesperson said.

The department has considered the findings from the PAC’s two earlier assessments, as well as responses from the community, the company, the Hunter thoroughbred industry, and agencies to these earlier processes.

“As a result of this extensive assessment, the department has recommended the project be approved subject to strict and updated conditions, including an ongoing liaison committee to establish and strengthen relationships between Anglo American and the two key neighbouring studs.”

The department has also recommended 23 detailed conditions to manage dust, noise, blasting and water.

Further, Australian National University's Professor Jeff Bennett has been asked to conduct an

independent peer review to provide a third-party assessment of the most likely impacts of the project on the nearby studs and broader thoroughbred industry. According to the department, Bennett had acknowledged the importance of Coolmore and Darley Studs to the Upper Hunter thoroughbred industry, but said that the review had found that the Drayton South operation would not compromise the studs' operational potential and that the physical off-site effects of the project, such as dust and noise, were within accepted guidelines.

"Overall, Professor Bennett's findings indicate there are 'good profit-based reasons for the studs to stay in their current locations' and that 'the benefits of the project will exceed its costs'," the Planning Department stated.

HORSE BREEDERS 'OUTRAGED'

The Hunter Thoroughbred Breeders Association (HTBA) has slammed the Planning Department's recommendation for approval and has called for New South Wales Premier Mike Baird to intervene.

"It beggars belief that the Department of Planning continues to support this proposal against the expert advice of three independent PACs and the New South Wales Gateway Panel. The only people who have ever thought this project was approvable are either working for Anglo American or the Department of Planning. This is also against a backdrop where the mine's owners have rendered it as 'noncore' and put it up for sale," said HTBA president Cameron Collins.

He added that the HTBA had lost confidence in the Department of Planning and called on Baird and Planning Minister Rob Stokes to implement the recommendations made by the PAC in November last year to protect the thoroughbred breeding industry through buffers, exclusionary zones or preservation measures.

The HTBA pointed out that the Hunter Valley's thoroughbred breeding industry contributes more than A\$5-billion a year to the national economy and A\$2.6-billion a year to the New South Wales economy, supporting over 230 000 jobs nationally.

Anglo American previously adjusted the mine plan for the Drayton South operation, including reducing the tonnage from a projected 189-million tonnes to only 75-million tonnes and cutting some A\$7-billion in coal revenue. The mine plan also reduced the life of the operation from 27 to 15 years.

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