LAND USE CONFLICT IN THE UPPER HUNTER REGION

PIA Position

PIA NSW advocates a strategic land use planning approach to minimise and mitigate existing and emerging land use conflicts in the Upper Hunter region. This approach must be supported by a regulatory framework which is adequately resourced to ensure compliance with environmental safeguards and maintains community confidence. There is a pressing need to identify and implement national and international best practice approaches to better manage these issues on the ground in consultation with local communities. Transparency and certainty in strategic land use planning is needed to ensure all stakeholders in the Upper Hunter region can plan and invest for the future. PIA NSW is committed to providing a professional contribution to this important regional policy conversation.

Background

The Upper Hunter region has a major role in the economic growth and supply of resources for the people of NSW and Australia. The economic prosperity of this region is sustained by a number of industries including:

- Agriculture
- Dairying
- Equine/thoroughbred breeding
- Horticulture
- Mining
- Tourism
- Viticulture.

Due to the inherent needs of each of these industries, there continues to be land use conflicts and arising issues, particularly with coal mining. However, the importance of this industry is acknowledged as it contributes a substantial component to the economic output of the Upper Hunter region, and it is one of the largest employers within the region.

It is noted that land use conflicts are not isolated to the Upper Hunter region with the wider Hunter region also impacted. Other areas affected include the emerging Gunnedah Coal Reserve located within a highly productive agricultural region; and the Illawarra Coal Reserves located below valuable water catchments providing drinking water to Wollongong and Sydney.

Existing and emerging land use conflicts

Land use conflicts in the Upper Hunter region typically revolve around the interaction of mining activities and other land uses such as human settlements, agriculture,
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August 2011

Viticulture and equine industries. The current regulatory approach to approving mining projects is within a framework of risk-based decision making, using a combination of environmental, economic and social values.

Mineral exploration licenses are currently issued without landowners consent. NSW coal resources can be found in the same area as some of Australia’s most fertile agricultural land.

Due to the scale and visibility of open cut mining activities, often in close proximity to other land uses, it is a challenge to minimise and/or mitigate impacts. Underground mining activities also create unique challenges for other land uses in terms of subsidence, ground water impacts and surface infrastructure changes.

The economic imbalance between the respective land uses is also evident in terms of mining’s ability to outbid other uses to secure land resources for extraction or environmental offsets. These market distortions can serve to elevate tensions between uses and within the community.

The challenge is to find a way for these respective land uses to co-exist, which incorporates effective land use planning.

Role of strategic land use planning

PIA NSW is advocating the development of a considered land use policy that balances the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the existing and future land uses in the Upper Hunter region.

Conflict can arise from direct impacts such as subsidence, noise, dust, odour, and vibration. Changes to landscape character and reduced visual amenity are also very visible effects that are frequently poorly implemented. Other potential impacts may occur as a result of changes to groundwater systems and local watercourses.

Market Distortions – Positive and Negative

Skewed employment opportunities and property prices are indirect impacts of the mining industry. Mining employees with substantial incomes introduce a different socio-economic demographic to rural regions; affecting housing affordability and job preferences.

Growing population generates additional demand on food resources, infrastructure and arable land placing further strain on the existing food production areas and carrying capacity of the land.

Planning Principles

PIA proposes the following planning principles to address existing land use conflicts in the Upper Hunter region.
1 A Strategic Land Use Approach

A strategic approach will identify areas of high environmental value and cultural sensitivity and will then nominate appropriate land uses supported by reliable capability and suitability mapping which consider community expectations and future requirements (e.g., food and water security and environmental conservation). Long-term land use must consider the future re-use and productive capacity of the land following the decommissioning of any land use.

2 Co-existence

Land uses competing for the same space can co-exist in certain circumstances. A key to such a desirable outcome is effective communication between affected stakeholders, particularly in terms of mining. A current obvious shortcoming is that different mining companies manage their own operations, without an overall body that addresses land use conflicts in a coordinated way. This can lead to ad-hoc or cumulative impacts attributed to all mining operations, resulting in those that manage their sites well being tainted by those doing less well. This increases perceived land use conflicts for all mining companies.

A formal mechanism is therefore recommended for acknowledging and addressing issues as they arise, with an emphasis on reducing cumulative impacts. All land users must also acknowledge the direct and indirect impact and design their operations to minimise and/or mitigate this impact.

3 Land use Buffers

The process of underground coal mining is only seen from surface processing, however the physical effects can be noticed much further afield in the form of mine subsidence; dust and noise impacts. In addition to the change in topography, subsidence has the potential to damage aquifers and cause irreversible impacts to valuable water resources. Open cut mining can have similar effects, as well as causing substantial changes to landform, vegetation removal and visual impacts when mines are seen from surrounding land uses and transport routes.

Further investigation is required to determine appropriate buffers for mining and other land use activities. It is also suggested that much more effective visual mitigation measures could be implemented, such as the coordinated planting of landscape buffers to screen views, provide biodiversity benefits and act as additional dust and noise control measures. A commitment by mining companies to improve the general amenity of areas near mines through the creation of attractive treed avenues would also have both scenic and public relation benefits.

4 Post mining legacy

Coal and other related fossil fuels are a finite resource. Yet, other land uses in the region, such as agriculture (including viticulture) and thoroughbred breeding, (subject to sustainable management) can potentially continue indefinitely.
Debate over the economic value of one land use of the other must consider the immediate gains compared to the long-term costs. Once valuable agriculture land is lost, it is unlikely that the land can be rehabilitated to a similar state to pre-resource extraction following mining.

The future of the Upper Hunter region needs to consider its economic survival following the withdrawal of the investment by the mining industry, and the predicted impacts of climate change. Economic development strategies should therefore include renewable energies (such as wind and solar), food security initiatives and eco-tourism.

The current mandatory system of progressive rehabilitation of mine sites should continue to be supported and monitored. To further improve current outcomes, which are sometimes criticised by the general public, greater enforcement and accountability in this important part of the mining process is recommended.

5 Precautionary Principle

Increased precautions for exploration and increased regulation for development of mining operations should be adopted. This will safeguard agricultural productive land and increase long-term food security. The transitional measures recently announced by the NSW Government for exploration licences are supported in the short term.