

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) supports a development application by White Mining Limited, a privately owned Australian company for the Ashton Coal Project. The project is located approximately 14km north west of Singleton. The village of Camberwell is located in close proximity to the proposed open cut and the mine surface facilities. The mine will produce approximately 4.2 to 4.4 million tonnes per annum at its peak production.

The proposal is a designated, integrated, State Significant Development, as it relates to a coal mine that requires the grant of a new mine lease. The proposal is subject to Ministerial Direction and will therefore be determined by the Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning as the consent authority. It fully accords with both regional and local environmental plans and is permissible, with consent, under the provisions of the Singleton local environment plan.

The Proposal

The project is to consist of an open cut and an underground coal mine, as well as a coal preparation plant and associated surface infrastructure. Environmental bunds will be constructed around the open cut operation and surface facilities.

The open cut operation will comprise of two pits, both of which will be contained within an area bounded by the Main Northern Railway, the New England Highway and Glennies Creek Road. The Arties Pit will be parallel to the New England Highway and will be used to develop the entry portal for the underground mine. The Barrett Pit will be located to the east of the Arties Pit. Initial emplacement of overburden will be to the east of the Barrett Pit and in an area to the south of the New England Highway. Following development of these initial emplacement areas, overburden will be backfilled into the Barrett Pit.

The underground mine will be located to the south of the New England Highway. The mine will be a descending multi seam operation and will target the Pikes Gully, Upper Liddell, Upper Lower Liddell and the Lower Barrett seams in sequence. Extraction will be by longwall methods with blocks aligned parallel to the western boundary of the Exploration Licence (EL) 4918..

Bowmans Creek will need to be diverted in advance of the longwall development in approximately year 3. This allows sufficient time to develop stream ecology prior to the stream flows being diverted. The diversion of flows is proposed for year 5.

Pit top facilities for coal preparation, stockpiling and train loading will be constructed to the north of the highway adjacent to the Arties Pit. Coal will be stockpiled on the floor of the Arties pit, and adjacent to the

coal preparation plant. A rail siding will run parallel to the Main Northern Railway of sufficient length to allow for loading of 9,000t unit trains.

Administration, car parking, stores and bathhouse facilities will be located adjacent to the mine access intersection off Glennies Creek Road.

Consultation

Consultation was undertaken with the community, public authorities and Aboriginal groups during the preparation of the EIS. A planning focus meeting was held at Singleton on the 16th of August 2001 to brief various public authorities on the Ashton Coal Project. Comments were also sought from other agencies which did not attend the meeting.

Community consultation was undertaken with the local residents of Camberwell via public meetings, newsletters and a comprehensive door knock that included most of the households surrounding the project and in the village. The issues raised during the consultation process have been considered throughout the preparation of the EIS.

Environmental Assessment

Air Quality

The operation of the Ashton Coal Project has the potential to impact on the village of Camberwell during adverse weather conditions, when emissions from other nearby mines are also considered. To avoid exceedences of criteria in the village, a number of operational controls will be implemented. The assessment of air quality has demonstrated that air quality criteria within Camberwell will not be exceeded with the implementation of these controls.

Noise

Noise modeling was undertaken for a range of operational scenarios. Predicted noise levels were assessed against the criterion. For neutral conditions, no exceedences were predicted. There were some exceedences predicted for construction and operational scenarios during an inversion or windy conditions from the north west. To avoid the predicted exceedences, a number of measures will be implemented. It was concluded that with specific controls adopted, the project would not result in exceedences of the EPA criteria.

Subsidence

Impacts of subsidence, as predicted from the mine plan can be controlled, as all of the longwall panels are located under grazing land. Measures, such as compensation, amelioration and repair can protect the interests of freehold landowners and infrastructure such as power transmission lines. Subsidence will range from zero

to almost 6 m over the Ashton Underground area, however this will occur at intervals over a period of approximately 18 years.

Groundwater

The main aquifers in the Ashton Project area are the coal seams and stream alluvium. The groundwater levels within the area of longwall extraction will take approximately 15 years to recover after mining, and groundwater levels within unmined strata to the west may take about 50 years or more to recover. There have been no significant impacts on groundwater quality predicted.

Flora and Fauna

No “significant effect” on threatened species, endangered populations and endangered ecological communities will occur as a result of the proposal the rehabilitation of the site may benefit the local fauna populations through the improvement in habitat which currently exists. The impact on flora will be compensated through a comprehensive rehabilitation plan. Rehabilitation will be conducted progressively, and may present opportunities to introduce more locally significant species than which are currently present.

Aquatic

Bowmans Creek was assessed as providing good aquatic habitat. Common carp was the only fish species observed during the field inspection. It was concluded that fish and invertebrate species which were likely to occur in Bowmans Creek were not listed under the Threatened Species provisions of the Fisheries Management Act 1994.

The stream diversion has been designed with specific attention to the provision of aquatic habitat. The stream will mimic a natural system by providing adequate pool and riffle sequences and the establishment of riparian vegetation.

Indigenous and Non Indigenous Heritage

An archaeological survey conducted over the project area identified 24 archaeological sites. Of these sites there were 12 identified as being impacted by subsidence or the western emplacement area. A further ten sites were identified as being located in the vicinity of the eastern emplacement, open cut or surface facilities area.

The assessment of European heritage did not conclude there would be any significant impacts.

Socio-Economic

The Ashton Coal Project has been demonstrated to have significant social and economic benefits. It will provide employment for 140 personnel during the operation and 200 during the construction phase, in a region that has seen declines in employment in the mining industry in recent years. The project will also

provide significant income for the region through capital expenditure, the provision of wages and predicted flow on impacts. Revenue will also be generated for the federal government through the export of the coal.

Visual

Potential visual impacts have been minimized through the use environmental bunds around emplacement areas and the pit. Bunds are proposed along Glennies Creek Road, which will shield view to the open cut pit from passing motorists. The bund will also mitigate visual impacts for the residents of Camberwell to the eastern emplacement and the open cut. Bunds which are proposed around the western emplacement will have similar effects. All bunds will be enhanced with vegetation and screen planting.

Transport

It was concluded that there would be no impact on traffic due to the Ashton Coal Project. All coal will be transported to the Port of Newcastle via rail. The domestic transport of coal will be via internal haul roads.

Environmental Management

White Mining Limited is committed to implementing an environmental management system that will provide the Ashton Coal Project with the highest environmental standards. The plan will include the monitoring of climatic conditions, air, noise, blasting, subsidence, surface water and groundwater. The plan will also provide details on remedial actions and reporting.

Conclusion

The Ashton Coal Project is a significant opportunity for the Hunter region. The project will generate local employment, which invariably has positive flow-on effects both socially and economically. The importance of such an opportunity cannot be understated, given the 25% decrease in employment for the mining industry over the past four years.

Specialist environmental studies, which have been conducted for the project, have concluded there is the potential for environmental impacts. White Mining has considered these impacts, and has designed the Ashton Coal Project, so that it will have minimal impact on the residents of Camberwell. The mine has been designed with the objective that the local amenity must be maintained. This has been achieved through the identification of operational controls and mitigation measures.

Justification of the project is based on its strong positive social and economic impacts. Environmental impacts have been demonstrated to be manageable, so that the impact on the village of Camberwell will be minimal.