

“Reclaiming our Valley”

Hunter Communities Network

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Submission Draft Hunter Regional Plan

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.

HCN has major concerns about the Draft Hunter Regional Plan (the Hunter Plan) because it fails to recognise the urgent need for a just transition away from reliance on the coal industry for employment and economic development, particularly in the Upper Hunter.

The structural decline of the thermal coal industry is a significant issue for the Hunter Region. The large international mining companies are planning to get out of the Hunter and have begun selling off mines to smaller entities.

The commitment to and capacity for successful rehabilitation of disturbed land during mine closure is uncertain. The management of final voids in the landscape needs to be considered at the regional scale.

The cumulative impact of current mine approvals in the Hunter has not been assessed. The long term impacts of large scale open cut mining operations on water sources, soils, and biodiversity is unknown. The natural resource base of the Hunter Region has been under serious threat with no understanding of the consequences for future land use and economic development.

Coal companies own 24% of all freehold land and 23% of the mapped Biophysical Strategic Agricultural Land in Muswellbrook Shire and 15% of all freehold land and 27% of the mapped Biophysical Strategic Agricultural Land in Singleton Shire.

The future state and use of this land has not been addressed in the Hunter Plan.

Likewise, the mining and coal-fired power industry own a significant volume of water from surface and groundwater sources in the Valley. Many of the groundwater licences are required to be retired at the end of mining because of the long term impact of aquifer drawdown for centuries after mine closure.

This will decrease the water availability for other uses in the future.

The impact of severe drought on water sources in the Hunter has not been addressed in the Hunter Plan. During the millennium drought water security for the irrigation and food producing sector was seriously impacted to ensure water supply for the power industry.

In early 2007 general security licences had nil allocation, towns in the Upper Hunter were on severe water restrictions and Bayswater Power Station had only 2 years of water supply left.

The Hunter Plan needs to identify the current water balance in the region including inflows, usage and measures for managing severe drought.

The impact of severe weather events caused by climate change has not been considered in the Hunter Plan.

There needs to be greater consideration of opportunities for diversifying the Hunter economy, particularly in the Upper Hunter. This should include:

- Planning and resourcing for renewable energy at all scales
- Pro-actively re-establishing manufacturing and energy-intensive industries that can be powered by renewable energy, taking advantage of the residual Hunter skills base and the Port of Newcastle
- Re-funding education and entities such as the Hunter TAFE that may enable the creative arts sector and grow the hospitality and tourism sector
- Advocating for adequate funding for the Newcastle CSIRO, Hunter Medical Research Institute, the University of Newcastle and other science and research entities that drive innovation and economic resilience
- Ensuring adequate infrastructure (such as high capacity fiber-optic broadband) to strengthen the digital economy
- Working toward climate stability to protect agricultural enterprises
- Promoting the Hunter wine and good food industries, nature based tourism and natural resource management sector

The Hunter Region has contributed a substantial amount of funds to the NSW Treasury over a long period of time. State funding towards diversification of the Hunter economy is now essential and should be clearly identified in programs and grant systems in the Hunter Plan.

HCN considers it imperative to conduct an independent regional cumulative impact assessment of the coal mining industry on natural resources, rural industries and rural communities. There should be no expansion of the coal industry or exploration for gas in the Upper Hunter until a full understanding of the extent of currently approved impacts is achieved.

HCN is concerned that there has been no consultation with community groups in the Hunter during the development of the Hunter Plan.

This is a real opportunity to identify a just transition in the Hunter so that workers now being retrenched from the mining industry have the opportunity to stay in the region and participate in the local economy.

Planning for a diverse and resilient Hunter economy, society and environment is critical and very urgent. The Hunter Plan does not achieve this very important direction.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "B. Smiles".

Bev Smiles
Convenor