

SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT REGARDING THE DRAFT HUNTER REGIONAL PLAN

I am impressed by the Draft Hunter regional Plan and the associated Draft plan for the growing Hunter City. They are extensive documents that outline significant plans for the coming years. However, I have some major concerns regarding the document. The primary concern is the lack of planning regarding climate change and the prominence of planning around expansion of the coal industry and unconventional gas. It is clear that the climate in the Hunter is changing (see “adapt NSW”) but there is no significant plan for mitigating these changes. Adaption is not enough.

Decline of Coal and Unconventional Gas

Mitigating the effects of climate change primarily involves reducing the emission of greenhouse gases primarily those derived from fossil fuels. The Draft Hunter regional plan is flawed from the outset. Goal 2 states:

“longstanding coal mining, viticulture and equine industries will continue to prosper on the world stage”.

Clearly we have seen a structural decline in coal mining in the Hunter. This has caused significant job losses and a decline in investment in the Hunter (between 20-24% decline – Minerals council report. NSW minerals council Economic-Impact-Report-2016_Final_HiRes_for-web-1). Despite this decline in the coal industry there has been a 2.1% decline in unemployment in the Hunter region (Hunter Research Foundation, Hunter-Economic-Indicators-Dec-2015). The future of the Hunter is already moving away from the coal industry and this should be encouraged. The future in the Hunter should not include further development of the coal industry. It should include the other elements of the Draft Hunter regional Plan, specifically, development of renewable energies.

Direction 2.1 states:

“The undeveloped coal resources available in the Hunter and Newcastle coalfields, supported by the efficient connections to the Port of Newcastle afforded by the Hunter Valley Coal Chain, provide immediate and long term opportunities for growth.”

In this age of global warming, it is inconceivable that plans are being made to expand coal mining. Plans should be made to support the other well established industries. These are sustainable and will provide long-term jobs and prosperity for the Hunter.

“The Hunter’s viticulture, equine and oyster aquaculture industries are as mature as its coal mining industry. The region is a recognised supplier of high-end wine, and thoroughbred horses and oysters, to global and national

markets.”

These industries are already threatened by the coal industry. No further expansion of the coal industry should occur in order to protect sustainable industries. These industries are already being threatened by the progressive increase in pollutants from the coal industry in the Hunter (National Pollution Inventory, Australian Government, Department of the Environment).

Further evidence of the decline in the fossil fuel industry has been the decommissioning of CSG activities in the Gloucester region. AGL states on its website, “it has taken a strategic decision that exploration and production of natural gas assets will no longer be a core business for the company due to the volatility of commodity prices”.

Obviously this has occurred since this plan was released so has not been included in the plan. This subsequently brings into question any other assumptions related to the expansion of the fossil fuel industry in the Hunter region. Since the draft plan was released there has been job losses at Mt. Arthur coal mine and Peabody Energy is on the brink of financial collapse. The future of the Hunter Valley should not be linked to these declining industries.

Effects on Human Health

The increase in PM2.5 and PM10 in the Hunter valley is affecting human health. The coal industry is the main source of these emissions and any expansion of the coal industry will have a further effect on health.

Muswellbrook and Singleton hospitals already have some of the highest rates of admissions for respiratory disease in the Hunter (Hunter New England local Health district report, HNE-2010_Respi_Cardio_Disease-InTheHunter). Encouragement and support of coal mining in the Hunter valley will increase air pollutants and likely increase the number of people with respiratory disease.

An increase in PM2.5 and PM10 levels increases cardiovascular disease and mortality. Currently more people die each year due to the effects of air pollution than die from car accidents. The Draft Hunter Plan should take note of these statistics and make changes to protect human health.

These changes include a better public transport service. The service should aim to reduce the dependency on motor vehicles. Any new public transport should be electric based so that emissions do not increase. Similarly, there should be more effort put into expanding the cycleways. This has been reference made to the “cycle safe” network. The completion and extension of this network should be a priority.

Climate change has serious and long term affects on human health as outlined in the recent Lancet journal.

<https://www.google.com.au/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwi0xOiOpaTLAhVJX5QKHRvZDR4QFggcMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thelancet.com%2Fcommissions%2Fclimate-change->

[2015&usg=AFQjCNHe1Rdeh6cTCX_8h_jRvqVsJMekjw&sig2=cdnMzLFmBkF5-xgrHm-bfQ](https://www.ustr.gov/locations/australia/2015/05/27/2015-usg-afqjcnhe1rdeh6ctcx_8h_jrvqvsjmekjw&sig2=cdnMzLFmBkF5-xgrHm-bfQ)

Support Sustainable Industries including Renewable Energy

Once again, established and sustainable industries need to be supported in the Hunter. Action 2.1.2 states:

“Land use planning will support sustainable agribusiness within the Hunter by maintaining a supply of lands with the right conditions for industries to operate.”

This implies that no more land should be used for coal mining or unconventional gas. On the other hand, there is a large potential for renewable energy in the Hunter Valley. Resources should be directed towards supporting this industry.

It is likely that there will be coal mine closures in the near future. Already we are seeing coal companies under financial strain with the potential for bankruptcy. Plans need to be made to rehabilitate these sites. One potential sustainable industry will be mine rehabilitation. Plans should be made to secure funding for mine rehabilitation before the companies go into liquidation. The risk would be insufficient funds for mine rehabilitation and old mine site becoming non productive land.

In the future we will need more electricity. However, this electricity needs to come from renewable sources. Investment in the renewable energy sector gives long term investment and is a sustainable industry. This is outlined in the recent report into wind farms. <https://www.cleanenergycouncil.org.au/dam/cec/policy-and-advocacy/reports/2012/Wind-Farm-Investment-Employment-and-Carbon-Abatement-in-Australia/Wind%20Farm%20Investment%2C%20Employment%20and%20Carbon%20Abatement%20in%20Australia-1.pdf>

Climate Change

Climate change is recognised in the Draft Hunter Regional Plan but it is under represented in the plan. I note in Action 2.4.3:

“Within the Hunter, managing biosecurity risks is relevant to:

- supporting the globalisation of trade;
- managing population growth and supporting healthy communities;
- responding to climate variability; and
- prioritising access to land and resources”

“Responding to climate variability” is necessary but it should not be the priority with dealing with climate change. Clearly mitigation of the effects of climate change is a much better investment than trying to cope with the effects of climate change. Mitigation of the effects of climate change means reducing greenhouse gases. Global

temperatures are increasing causing extreme weather events resulting in financial strain on governments. Currently, temperatures are increasing and no one knows when this will end.

The NSW government recognizes the human contribution to global warming (Hansard documents NSW parliament 16/3/16):

“(2) That this House acknowledges that:

1. (a) the impacts of climate change on health and wellbeing undermine the human rights of people across the world, in particular affecting marginalised groups and younger people; and
2. (b) developed countries such as Australia, as the largest contributors to historic greenhouse gas emissions and having the greatest capacity to adapt our economies and societies, bear the greatest responsibility for taking urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit the impacts of climate change.”

Extreme weather events have been recognized in the document. Direction 4.3 recognised a number of recent events:

“2007 ‘Pasha Bulker’ storms – which claimed 10 lives, left 105,000 homes without power and cost an estimated \$1.35 billion;²⁹ and

- 2015 Hunter ‘super storm’ – which claimed four lives and caused an estimated \$1.55 billion in insurance claims and widespread disruptions to power supply.”

Extreme weather events have always occurred but they are now occurring more frequently (UNISDR data). **When planning for the future it is incompetent and negligent to try and deal with extreme weather events alone without trying to decrease the cause of these events.**

It has even been recognised in the document that there will be an increase in climate events!

“As climate trends continue to change, many of these hazards are expected to occur more frequently and in some cases, with greater intensity in the future.”

Again the only way to try and mitigate these events is to immediately reduce the emission of greenhouse gases and this is not addressed in the Draft Hunter Regional Plan.

It is not sufficient, as stated in Action 4.3.1:

“The NSW Government will:

- continue to support councils to consider the long term implications of climate change in decision-making;”

It is imperative that the NSW government takes the lead in tackling climate change. Climate change is occurring now and immediate action needs to be taken. It is insufficient to leave it in the hands of councils. Planning for climate change should be one of the main outcomes of the Draft Hunter regional Plan.

Managing Future Outcomes

Managing the effects of mining on agriculture, the environment and health is addressed in Action 2.4.3:

“Strategic planning can support the effective management of biosecurity risks. This is particularly the case where the expansion of residential development into rural areas, or the expansion of rural or resource industries, increases the risk of animal and plant pests and diseases affecting food production, the environment (particularly wildlife) and human health.”

The section goes onto state:

“The NSW government will: prepare a development assessment guideline for impacts on human health from dust (including dust generated by mining and other activities).”

Who is going to be involved in the development of this guideline?
When is this guideline going to be created?
What is going to be assessed in this guideline?

From a medical perspective this type of assessment needs to be done before there is any further expansion of the coal and unconventional gas industries or any further expansion of residential development in the Hunter valley. Urban consolidation needs to occur before further residential expansion is planned.

This brings us back to the beginning of the document.

“A Hunter Regional Plan Coordination and Monitoring Committee will be established, with membership from the NSW Government and councils.”

Where is the medical representation on this committee? It is essential that any development committee in the Hunter valley needs to have medical representation. It is clear that activities in the Hunter valley are having a significant effect on the health of the population. Consequently it is imperative that there is medical representation on this committee.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is fabulous that a plan has been created looking at the future of the Newcastle and the Hunter valley. The Hunter Valley has had a long history of sustainable agriculture and economic prosperity. The future will be with sustainable industries. The coal industry is in a structural decline. The worldwide demand for coal is decreasing and the effects of climate change are becoming more acute. The future of the Hunter is not with the coal or unconventional gas industries.

The major deficiency in this plan is the prominence of the coal industry in future planning when the plan should be in a transition away from coal and the support for sustainable industries.

There is now a great opportunity to expand the sustainable industries in the Hunter Valley and to expand investment in the renewable energy sector.

From a health perspective, it is imperative that changes are made to protect the health of the population. This includes mitigating the effects of climate change, putting in place changes to improve the population's health and creating employment in sustainable industries.