

Submission No. 598 by Roslyn Seymour on 1 July 2021, 10.50–11.05am
To the Fingerboards Mineral Sands Project Inquiry and Advisory Committee

Good morning Committee Members

I am Roslyn Seymour, currently a resident of Paynesville, East Gippsland. Thank you for allowing me to make this submission.

I am here today, accompanied by my husband Bernie, to express our deep concern about the proposed Fingerboards Mineral Sands mine itself, as well as the process that has occurred since the publication of the Environment Effects Statement in late 2020.

We own a 62-hectare grazing property at [REDACTED] Lindenow [REDACTED]. As the crow flies, this is approximately 4 kilometres east of the mine boundary. The Lindenow–Glenaladale Road is one of the preferred transport routes for the 80-a-day B-Double truck movements, and possibly the other 240-a-day ore trucks. The property has been in my husband’s family for 60 years, just like a majority of other farming properties in the area close to the mine. It is lovely grazing land with a natural wetland section in one corner, making a good water supply for livestock. (I have attached two maps that I have hand labelled showing our property with our house site and the proximity to the mine.)

We are part of the mine’s neighbouring environment, so we have followed the development of the proposal and aspects of the EES since learning of Fingerboards in early 2016. Consequently, I have been a supporter of the Mine-free Glenaladale group and attended various community consultation sessions.

I have used these definitions of ‘the environment’ from two well-known dictionaries in shaping my submission:

1. The Oxford Languages online dictionary states that the environment consists of: *‘The surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates.’*
2. The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides a similar definition: *‘The aggregate of social and cultural conditions that influence the life of an individual or community.’*

My arguments focus on the damaging effects that I perceive the proposed construction and operation of the mine will have on our lives and the broader community.

The prospect of the Fingerboards mine has caused great disruption to us personally. My husband and I love our property as well as the surrounding community and landscape. We had plans to build our country escape on the land once my husband retired. But our plans were put on hold when we learnt of this proposal. We didn't want to have a house constructed if a mine was going to be built so close to us, with the effects it would have on our quality of living. The community upheaval, traffic, noise, dust, and the lowering of the water table are all very concerning. We felt then that the whole way of living in Lindenow South and surrounding areas would be threatened.

And we still feel this. The EES has done nothing to allay our concerns. Our plans have been disrupted for 6 years and will be destroyed if the mine is approved. The ongoing and drawn-out process has caused us mental anguish, and we know that this is being felt by many others within our community. I contend that the negative effects on individuals and communities have been felt for at least 6 years and have worsened over the lengthy timeframe leading to this hearing. A strategy proposed in the EES to reduce the impact of stress in the community from a rating of 'high' to 'moderate' is for Kalbar to establish a fund to support community events. This is a nonsense. It will not address our stress. Only stopping the mine will. In Tabled Document 333, of the 5 community grants awarded money so far, only 2 of them were for the benefit of nearby landholders anyway. And we certainly don't accept that a target of 'moderate' stress is tolerable.

The site of the proposed mine is within the natural and social environment of an existing and well-established landscape. It is not somewhere in an isolated location where negative effects are likely to make less of an impact.

The area is made up of medium to intensive agricultural land that historically has made an important contribution to the economy and the social cohesion of the East Gippsland communities that have developed within it. Livestock farming and vegetable growing in the region are fundamental to this area. The agriculture is sustainable and continually undergoing innovation to consolidate and expand markets. This land-use contributes directly to the local economy and shapes the built environment in a gentle way.

Most people would agree that an open-cut mine will be an eyesore compared to the existing environment. It will be a blight on the landscape, carving away the topsoil, creating dust, using billions of litres of our precious water supply, and destroying the beauty of the countryside through gauged-out earth and huge stockpiles of extracted material.

Mines have finite expiration dates – in this case 20 years. During this time, they extract from the environment without putting back. More jobs, and the flow-on benefits, could be created locally if the water needed by the mine was redirected to the existing horticulture industry.

Company profits will go to the owners. And the largest stakeholder is an overseas investment company with no vested interest in the East Gippsland community, only in its performance to shareholders.

Kalbar says the mine will employ 200 people during the operation of the project, which would have a spin-off effect in creating 200 indirect jobs. This compares to the existing 1500 workers that are directly employed by horticulture in the Lindenow Valley, each job of which indirectly generates another four jobs, so 6000 jobs. But there is no analysis in the EES of how many existing agricultural jobs could be lost if the horticultural industry is negatively affected through dust, contamination of water sources, and disruption to the irrigation water from the Mitchell River and the aquifer.

We all know that mines come and go. More often than not, they leave scars on the earth and depressed communities. Land has to be rehabilitated but invariably it will never be the same. What guarantee is there that rehabilitation will be carried out in a timely and sustainable way? The track record of Victoria's Earth Resources Regulation in ensuring rehabilitation by miners has not been good.

I have read recent examples of the shortfalls of mine rehabilitation. For example, a 2018 report titled 'Mind the Gap', states that in the Hunter Valley, the nine largest coal mines had collectively only rehabilitated 30% of the land that they had disturbed. In other words, there was no active rehabilitation being undertaken on 70% of the land. In fact, the Ravensworth mine fell well below the average, with less than 17% of its damage being rehabilitated.

On 6 May this year, Peter Hannam of The Sydney Morning Herald reported that Hunter Valley coal mining companies had not set aside enough funds to fill their open-cut holes or maintain the vegetation cover necessary to restore the landscape.

What happens if Kalbar becomes insolvent and unable to sustain its proposed rehabilitation? Even though there may be a mandated rehabilitation bond, if the company flounders, the rehabilitation will have to be managed by some other authority. Will this mean the Shire and/or the State Government will have to take on this onerous task? Is this covered by the EES? Where is the guarantee that what has happened in many other mining situations such as at Benambra in East Gippsland is not repeated here?

At a community level, the proposed mine has already had a negative effect. It has created division about who will benefit from the mine and who won't. Who will sell their farmland and who won't. Whether it will be a boost to the economy, or not. Whether it will sap our water supplies. And so on. The 'divide and conquer' methodology of large development proposals now exists, and we are seeing neighbours turning on each other. The social dynamics of our community have already changed for the worse.

The other major concern that I have is with the EES process itself. Even though the EES was 'completed' in September 2020 there have been several changes tabled since then, in particular:

1. The transport route has covered a range of options. One of two current options is for the 80-a-day increase in B-Double trucks to use the Lindenow-Glenaladale Road to the highway then to the Fenning's railway siding in Bairnsdale. And these will all go past our property and brake to enter the town. And I am still unsure what route the other 240-a-day ore truck movements will take. The goal posts keep shifting. The increase in 24-hour traffic going past our farm, combined with the noise of braking to slow for the town, would be unbearable for us. More recently we have been told that a private haul road through farming properties to the Fernbank siding is the preferred option. But where is the proof that this route and the new rail siding will be viable? And why is there still so much confusion about what the actual route will be? How can an adequate assessment of the effects of traffic be made?
2. Sixteen centrifuges have been added. Centrifuges have never been used in mineral sands mining before worldwide so the fact that they are untested means that their viability and the environmental effects are unknown. This poses unacceptable risks to the community. When will their effects be assessed and made public?
3. Then in May this year Kalbar announced they had created a pastoral company. Kalbar's rationale for this is so that grazing can be used to maintain the land. The company says that it 'expects it to be self-sufficient within a few years.' There is no mention of this in the EES, with a supporting business plan. It is interesting that Kalbar is now proposing to graze the very land that in the EES they claimed is degraded. If this is the case, what makes them think they will be better graziers than the farmers who have known the land for many generations? I am concerned that mining companies often create pastoral companies to graze the land they will mine to remove or reduce any biodiversity before surveys are undertaken.

Finally, I want to say that some of the negative effects of the mine may not be seen immediately. When they are discovered, it will be too late to turn back. That is why I ask the Committee to use the Precautionary Principle in considering their recommendation.

The Precautionary Principle requires that, even though there may be a lack of scientific evidence of a damaging impact eventuating, this uncertainty should not be used as the basis in favour of the proposal. Applying this principle enables a decision-making body to take a risk-management approach to protect the natural and human environment in which development is proposed.

There have been many issues raised by experts and individual community members like myself about the damaging impacts that will adversely affect the health, well-being and livelihoods of the surrounding community. I believe these strongly indicate that the Precautionary Principle should be applied.

Articles such as the one I read in the industry magazine, 'Australian Mining', of 19 August 2020 entitled: 'Kalbar sets up **mega** Victorian mineral sands mine' imply that this huge mining venture is a fait accompli.

Taking a precautionary approach will help ensure that irreparable damage by this proposed 'mega' mining operation is not allowed to be caused.

My husband and I believe there **IS** time to prevent a negative outcome for the community and the natural environment that we both cherish. We urge this committee to make their recommendations to the Minister for Planning on the side of caution and recommend the project not proceed.

Thank you for the opportunity of presenting our personal concerns about this project for your consideration.