

Submission Cover Sheet

Fingerboards Mineral Sands Project Inquiry and Advisory
Committee - EES

12

Request to be heard?: No

Full Name: Gavin Johnston

Organisation:

Affected property:

Attachment 1: EES_REPLY.docx

Attachment 2:

Attachment 3:

Comments: See attached submission

In the following submission I wish to highlight some of my main concerns that deeply disturb me about the thoroughness and oversight of particular areas in the findings of this EES.

Having grown up, worked and experienced what the immediate proposed project area has to offer, I believe the studies undertaken for completion of this EES are not conclusive enough.

I feel the period of time, man hours and the effects this project will have on the local industry and family communities, can not possibly be measured over just a few years of research through predictive modelling, comparing it to similar projects in completely different geographical locations or timeline predictions.

Flora and Fauna studies for example cannot be accurately assessed through short surveys at predicted timeframes throughout the year when plant or animals are expected to most likely occur. Having grown up in the area for the last 36 years, I know all too well that no two seasons are the same and what Flora and Fauna that might occur one year will not necessarily return the following, leaving these type of predicted statistics entirely inaccurate in my view.

Animals such as the Eastern Long-Neck Turtle may frequent certain parts of the project area in a wetter than average year, but will always return to known and reliable water sources outside of the project footprint in the drier seasons eg: Providence ponds and APM pine plantation fire dams. The proponents findings has claimed that three thirty minute surveys over supposedly all seasons across multiple years (but very few) is acceptable for a Diurnal Bird survey. It has been through my experience after spending many man hours in the nearby bush observing nature and enjoying what it has to offer (real life experiences not just statistics), that if something that is rarely occurring in the area, it is not going to show in the proponents allocated 30 minute timeframes. This is especially true when the personal have disturbed the area while achieving to get into there desired viewing position, not remaining out of sight and motionless to allow nature to return to there calm and relaxed state, and not looking too un-natural like a couple of paid strangers in these rare birds habitat.

On the 27th-30th of November 2018 nocturnal surveys were undertaken trying to locate the Powerful Owl and the Masked Owl which were not sighted. Theses animals inhabit the bushland and roadside vegetation adjacent to the project area and this lack of commitment, along with unusual human movement again with unfavourable seasonal conditions, would not be an accurate conclusion especially over only three nights of observation. Motion activated cameras and artificial mimic calling are not suitable study methods to locate such an elusive species over the minimal timeframe allocated. I believe this lack of commitment to accurate study these species to be a quick sign off and cover up and does not give these vulnerable animals the respect they deserve.

The study details that "Field surveys recorded 117 Fauna species including 108 native and 9 introduced species associated with the area", "Two Nationally significant species were recorded within the study area"- a Grey Headed Flying Fox on the 26th August 2019 and the Australian Grayling found where the Perry Gully joins the Mitchell River 550m North East of the project area. Both these species are listed as vulnerable under the EPBC act. Another 17 Nationally Significant Fauna Species were recorded within 10km of the project area.

As a result an alternative the proponent suggests and concludes "None of these species will be significantly impacted by the removal of habitat within the project area/infrastructure options area." "The potential habitat for these species to be impacted by the project is of low or moderate quality, and higher quality habitat is available for the species to use nearby in the region (e.g, Mitchell River National Park)".

My argument with claims and solutions to these findings like these are if the Mitchell River National Park is so suitable, why don't all these 117 species already live there and why should they be forced to move away. If their current habitat was unable to support them and their daily requirements, they would not occur in prolific enough numbers to be used in this survey.

The EES openly declares that the "Removal of known habitat for the nationally significant grey-headed flying fox, state significant yellow-bellied sheath-tail bat, regionally significant emu and eastern long-necked turtle, and migratory species rufous fantail: Each of these species were detected during field surveys. The proposed removal of known habitat for these species within the project Fingerboards Mineral Sands Project Environmental Effects Statement 754-ENAUABTF11607_6_Ch9_impact_assessment_Rev0 August 2020 9-57 area is not able to be avoided given the location of the ore and includes at least 76 trees likely to be hollow-bearing, and forest, woodland and wetland/aquatic habitats."

Some of these trees would be over 100 years old and hold these characteristics because of their age and the environment they occur in. Removal of these styles of trees can not be substituted or replicated in a short space of time after the life of the mine. The revegetation/rehabilitation stages and the planting of new trees over the discontinued mine void will not provide the same naturally occurring habitat in the same encouraging safe condition as it does now for any of our fauna if it so chooses to return.

Kalbar's plans for an operational mine and our Native Fauna to coexist during the life of the mine is absolute rubbish. They state that "Native fauna species (if present) are expected to habituate to project-generated noise and/or move away during noisy periods, and to continue using the areas adjoining the project area for foraging, roosting and/or breeding." "As the project would occur over several years, mobile species would move away from noise sources and recolonise suitable habitat elsewhere." I believe this to be true as there would no longer be any suitable habitat left on the project area to accommodate these animals, leaving them feeling vulnerable and distressed.

With light pollution being a prevalent concern "Such light can adversely affect wildlife and trigger detrimental behavioural and physical responses. Nocturnal fauna (mammals such as possums, gliders and bats, and birds) are most likely to be affected, although the impact is unlikely to extend far from the light source." My personal view is if they are not already dispersed away from the area by the lighting, the continuous noise of machinery, vehicles and equipment will discourage their existence anyway.

The idea of continuing to undertake your livelihood, driving past, working around and trying to enjoy what will be left of the outskirts of the proposed mine void, will be hard enough to tolerate without the very reason why we are here in the first place, the natural attraction that the land, surrounding area and local vital agriculture industry. We will have no choice but to sit back and watch it all be decimated before our very eyes.

I can't imagine what the tourist will be thinking as they pass a dirty big mining operation on their way to visit what they came into the area to see such as the Mitchell River National Park, Den of Nargun, Dargo or other naturally occurring attractions. I don't think the view of Overburden stockpiles, 6ft high mesh fencing, heavy vehicles creating hazards on the road, dust from mining equipment is what they see in the tourist brochure or what they had envisaged could be allowed to occur so close to the natural attractions that they came to experience and enjoy. Personally I don't think any amount of overburden walls and selected 'sensitive view points' will hide the truth of what has been approved to occur behind the fence.

Both the Fernbank-Glenaladale Road and the Bairnsdale-Dargo Road are a popular cycling route and quite often host events because of their uncongested free flowing nature and spectacular views. I can't see how they and other frequent road users will benefit from the consequences of an approved Mineral Sands Mine. How can the proponent guarantee the safety of all road users and that this inconvenience of additional traffic will not impede or disturb the local residents' daily livelihoods and operations.

Several local and surrounding community businesses and livelihoods will be depleted if this mine is approved. The scar left on the landscape will deter tourists, and the area will see a dramatic decline in visitor numbers due to the appearance and toxic nature of the mine. The image a Mineral Sands Mine will portray on the area will discourage potential visitors to nearby small businesses such as Coonawarra Trail Rides, Our local Bed and Breakfast, Echo Bend Caravan park and the like. The area will become unsellable to tourists as mine contaminant truths appear and people are turned off the area after 'googling' what is in the local area to see. If they research or view the area by satellite imagery it will demonstrate just how close this mine is to local Attractions, water supply, or the accommodation they had hoped to book, further discouraging them.

The Proposed Mine will compete with existing well established Agricultural operations on many levels. With both Existing river allocation licence users and ground water bore irrigators my main concern - "Project-related extraction could result in the winterfill threshold being reached marginally faster, potentially reducing water availability for other winterfill licenced users." This Project can only have a negative effect on our current Agricultural industry who already relies so heavily on water extraction from both sources. I feel it will bring the end to water security for the Lindenow Valley and the 'low to moderate' risk of airborne contaminants will destroy our long-lived reputation of a 'Clean Green' local vegetable industry.

Our local seasonal vegetable harvest relies so heavily on local people returning year after year to ensure consistent and reliable labour hire. I believe the Proposed project will diminish the employment options for the existing operational agricultural enterprises due to the higher wages being offered at the mine. This will cause unnecessary stress and financial strain on farming income if hourly rates have to be increased to match the mines pay rate as well as the prospect of not having crops pick at the correct time due to unattainable labour and not being able to meet market demands at the crucial times when required.

Agricultural and local farming operations will also have to contend with the inconvenience of an increase of Heavy vehicle movements on all local surrounding roads. Daily events such as moving Livestock, farm machinery, produce from paddocks will all be hindered and become unsafe due to the constant flow of heavy vehicle movements, increasing the likelihood of fatalities on our already degrading roads. Not to mention the increase of potential danger around small towns and schools if these travel routes are used as an acceptable alternative.

The lack of appropriate consultation with local Aboriginal community groups and the limited opportunities they were given to voice their concerns, has diminished any valuable input and influence they could have contributed in preserving their cultural heritage and local history in this project area. The report states "Formal input from the registered aboriginal party, the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC), was not possible during the assessment process, and will be undertaken in parallel to the development of the cultural heritage management plan." We all know that by the time this project progresses to this stage, GLaWAC's input and any reasoning they have to protect this land, will be overshadowed by minimal criteria and will be signed off without the dedicated research and local Aboriginal community input, that it deserves.

With statistics like “A review of the VAHR register identified 47 registered places located within the project area” and “349 total artifacts found”, 60 surface and 63 subsurface artefacts located throughout the proposed project area, highlights the fact that this area holds a lot of Aboriginal Cultural values, connections to the land and even more reason why it requires more thorough research across the whole proposed 20+ year work plan. These figures may sound significant now but imagine what the real statistics would show if the proponent had received the appropriate input from GLaWAC on local site locations and explored the **whole** mine footprint. This is a known fact as the cultural heritage studies were not undertaken on several surrounding properties meaning the findings of this report are entirely inconclusive, inaccurate and degrading to the local Aboriginal community.

I also find the following quote typical of the depth and effort that was placed into this survey by the proponent and the fact that only registered Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Place VAHR 8322-0090 to be disturbed by the project was not located. “The tree is likely to have been destroyed in the 2014 bushfires, as the remains of a burned tree stump were found at the approximate coordinates of the registered place. The physical location of the registered place is wholly located within the proposed disturbance area for the project and construction of the project will destroy this location.” This is the exact behaviour that I expect to see in the following years carried out by the proponent. I think these actions appear extremely convenient and favourable towards Kalbar and just another effort to cover up another significant environmental impact.

Human Health (What they don't tell you in this report)

Kalbar appeared in the area conveniently in 2014 after East Gippsland had just experienced one of the harshest droughts in history when we as a community were trying to rebuild yet again after the devastating bushfires swept through the Fingerboard proposed mine area in February of that year. With high livestock numbers lost, houses destroyed and people's financial circumstances pushed to the limit, they started their attack on the local community.

The constant Bickering, pressuring landowners and trying to sell ‘The next best thing’ for the area, did not sit well with the local community especially when we were trying to stay positive, continue to make a living and get back on track. As a community does in times like these, we stuck together and attended Kalbar's first community consultation, giving them the benefit of the doubt and listened to the dribble that carelessly flowed from their mouths.

Imagine 100+ concerned, scared and confused local residents sitting in their local hall being dictated to and been told that some newly established company is going to come in and establish a Mineral Sands Mine right here at the Fingerboards. Kalbar's approach and presence was degrading, unethical and demoralising considering we were the people who actually valued the area and had just gone through the effort to re-establish it after this disaster.

They told us they had already gained approval to mine near Nowa Nowa in East Gippsland and that there will not be any issues getting the project approved here as there is only ‘Bluegum Plantations, a few sheep farmers and that the land around here is of minimal importance and of low quality’. Thankfully the very person that made that statement in front of 100+ people that night left Kalbar Operations in the following years and returned to Sydney where I personally think he belongs. These are the style of tactics, lack of transparency and attitude we as a community have endured over the past 6 years through their consultation process.

The unnecessary stress, anxiety, division amongst the community this proposal has caused is unrepairable. Some people haven't been able to handle the constant bullying tactics used, lies created by the proponent and have had no choice but to move out of the area, the remainder of the population has been forced to take a side and hold onto their beliefs and stand their ground.

As a community we have participated in everything that the proponent has asked for, community meetings, pop up information sessions and project updates, all poorly conducted letting out very little information that we didn't already know.

We as a concerned local community have spent unreplaceable man hours attending these meetings, writing letters and responses, adding in our thoughts and ideas and honestly almost completing this report for them. I find this not only extremely time consuming but has enable them to compile a report on 'our' findings to establish a project who 'we as a community' never wanted and didn't even have to think about 7 years ago which will now intern destroy our livelihoods and whole reasons why we live and work in this beautiful area.

The proposed project has caused a lot of speculation, uncertainty and unclear objectives. The Project footprint has been a constantly changing goal post, with plans, the locations of proposed roads, the size of the area to be mined, constantly changing over the past 6 years. This does not give us as a concerned community any confidence or reassurance that this company has a clear objective and if they are able to manage the environmental risks involved. Not to mention their previous track records with affiliated companies (Iluka) and their lack of experience in large functioning successful mines.

The lack of liaison with affected landowners over changes to the project, access to farmland and other requirements needed to complete this ESS, has established an untrustworthy relationship between the proponent and the affected landowners. Not to mention the number of different consultants and Kalbar employees we have had to deal with over the past 6 years due to Kalbars inability to be able to keep professional and committed employees. This doesn't install too much confidence and reassurance with the company as an employer or the likelihood of Kalbar been in business for too long and their future existence if the project gets approved.

Kalbars operations in my personal experience has never been clear or up front with any findings or answers during public meetings or landholder consultations. Their approach of handballing tactics and one answered approach of "the answer to that will be in the EES" has me feeling we should be kept in the dark for some reason. Their normal 'acceptable' obscured, barely readable maps with local houses, dwellings and important feature such as the East Gippsland Water Supply or the Mitchell River just off to the side approach (even in this report occasionally) displays the lack of transparency and honesty throughout the consultation process.

The constant "sugar coating' and talking down of any potential environmental or health risks raised by the public are reassured in this report as Kalbar make claims such as; the 1 farm and two dwellings on the project footprint, all 3 of which have been purchased by Kalbar Operations, will be uninhabited during the project (11.3.9).

So my question is just how safe really is this proposed project? Apparently good enough to sacrifice us as a local community to continue living, working around this functional mine, but I'm certain that any Kalbar employees or the people who approve this project would not find it acceptable living where these contaminants of "low to moderate risk' may affect them or their families.

Kalbar will try tear what we value so dearly from our lives and leave us with the unrepairable stress, financial hardship and way of life we as a functionable caring community have chose to endeavour, just to exploit the opportunity and onsell this project to overseas investors and not keep it local. This project may be the stepping stone Kalbar needs to actually become something instead of a name on an abandoned shed and shop front in our local main town, but the repercussions if approved will cement the fate of so many local businesses, farming communities and our areas current viability.

In conclusion this whole process has placed unnecessary stress and unrepairable strain on already functionable and thriving community. No amount of compensation for land, profit from mineral sands or disruption to the environment will ever replace what we already have or the reason that we choose to live here in the first place.

Yours sincerely

Gavin Johnston.