Enhanced Risk to Sydney’s Drinking Water

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The incremental damage to the Special Areas, the heartlands of Sydney’s catchment, continues with yesterday’s announcement from the Planning Assessment Commission (PAC), giving the green light to India’s Wollongong Coal mine to continue mining within the Dam Notification Area of the Cataract Dam, holding around 10% of Sydney’s water supply.

The Rivers SOS Alliance supports the position of the Sydney Catchment Authority, which advised the PAC that it’s opposed to this mining operation as it is within the Dam Notification Area (i.e. a zone providing a safety buffer around the water storage dams).

The Sydney Catchment Authority’s position was dismissed by PAC, although it has sole charge of the protection of the catchment as mandated in the Sydney Water Catchment Management Act (1998).

Instead, in order to keep afloat a mining operation with a history of financial and compliance problems, and abuse of its workforce, the PAC is complicit in putting the sources of our drinking water at further risk.

The future impacts on water quality and quantity were outlined in detail by 34 speakers from various environmental and residential groups, at a PAC public hearing on this mine expansion, on 30 October. But the major community concerns have also been dismissed.

The so-called experts on the PAC panel charged with making the “determination” were Professor Jim Galvin, regularly employed as a consultant by the mining industry, currently an advisor for BHP Billiton, formerly head of the University of NSW’s School of Mining Engineering, which solicits funds from the industry; and Mr Garry West, a retired politician from Orange (National Party) with no expertise in mining engineering, water management or ecology. Can this duumvirate really be called an “independent panel of experts ?”

As NSW’s Chief Scientist noted, we are the only country in the world which allows longwall mining operations in its drinking water catchment.

A visiting delegation of Chinese water scientists from Hainan province were shocked to see our powerpoint display of mine damage to rivers and creeks in the Special Areas of the catchment. This is not allowed in China. They asked us: “Don’t you have the vote ?”

Would voting make a difference ? Are we a democracy or a corporatocracy run by Big Coal and Gas ?

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