

## **Coalmine dangerous to public, says health boss**

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A proposed coalmine on the central coast would cause air pollution leading to respiratory problems and an increasing death rate, the area director of public health has warned the NSW Planning Department.

A mining company, Kores Australia, plans to dig up 151 million tonnes of coal over a period of 37 years from a mine west of Wyong, but the operation would release a large amount of fine coal dust into the air. It said there was no public health risk.

The NSW Health senior public health official in the region, Dr Peter Lewis, warned in a submission to the department that pollution had been underestimated and would "produce increased respiratory symptoms and morbidity among residents".

Dr Lewis said the air quality data provided by the company in its environmental assessment was in some cases inadequate and central coast residents would be likely to suffer health impacts even if the level of pollution remained within recommended risk levels.

"If this proposal were to go ahead, much greater attention is required to prevent the level of contamination of the air that is currently described in the modelling of this section," Dr Lewis wrote, after consulting the Environmental Health Branch of NSW Health.

Coal dust, known as particulate pollution, would spread "well beyond the boundaries of the land owned by the proponents", he wrote.

"This concern exists because any increased exposure to particulate pollution is associated with increased adverse health outcomes, even if the levels are below the current guidelines."

Kores Australia responded to some of the pollution concerns, which include the possible effect on schools close to the mine site, in a report lodged with the NSW Planning Department in September.

"Detailed assessment by air quality specialists concludes that there will be no significant impact on the local air quality," Kores Australia said in its report. "The project will meet all current dust emission criteria. The assessment has included cumulative impacts from other dust sources in the region."

It said "coal is not toxic or poisonous and is not listed as a hazardous substance under any environmental legislation.

However, while particulate matter of any kind in the air is subject to regulatory control, the [environmental assessment] demonstrates that there is no concern or risk of elevated dust levels at any schools in the region."

An independent panel within the NSW Planning Assessment Commission is now considering the public submissions, including Dr Lewis's letter, and the company's response. It will produce a report this month.

A spokesman for the Planning Minister, Tony Kelly, said the minister had the final say on whether the mine would be given approval to proceed.

A group of residents opposing the mine, the Australian Coal Alliance, said the mine would spread dust over a wide area and affect the health of thousands of people in the Wyong district, which has a rapidly-expanding population.

## **Dust danger**

Kores Australia is remarkably ill-informed when it states that "coal is not toxic or poisonous". Coal is not just carbon, it contains heavy metals such as mercury, arsenic and lead, carcinogenic benzene derivatives, sulphides and radioactives - all toxic to living organisms, especially when inhaled as fine particulate dusts.

Hunter Valley health statistics, just beginning to reveal the long-term impact of coal-dust inhalation on respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and cancer rates, demonstrate that coal and coal-fired power generation are far from benign.

**Dr Pauline Roberts** Inverell