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GREATER DISCUSSION AND COMMUNICATION REQUIRED ON THE 'ACCEPTABLE' IMPACTS OF UNDERGROUND MINING

The NSW mining industry is advocating for a more rigorous approach to assessing the trade-offs between the social and environmental benefits and costs related to mining project applications, to secure the future of the estimated \$8.5 billion per year coal industry in the State's Southern Coalfields.

NSW Minerals Council Chief Executive, Dr Nikki Williams, will present to an Independent Expert Panel set up by the NSW Government later this week, formed to undertake a strategic review of the impacts of underground mining in the Southern Coalfield on significant natural features. The Panel will also provide advice on best practice for the assessment, mitigation, management, monitoring and remediation of subsidence impacts from underground mining in the region.

"NSWMC welcomes the Independent Panel process as an opportunity to investigate the science and facts around underground mining. We recognise that mining does have impacts and whilst the industry is subject to the strictest regulation in the State, opportunities exist to improve the current system."

Dr Williams will present the case against mandatory buffers between mining operations and natural features, such as rivers and recommend an open, transparent assessment of the social benefits of a project against the social costs.

"Mandatory buffers and restrictions of this type would impose an unreasonable opportunity cost on business and the State on behalf of the community. Such action would pander to the vested interests of minority groups within the community while disadvantaging the people of NSW in the way of jobs, income and investment into regional areas such as the Illawarra, which rely on mining and related industries for their prosperity," said Dr Williams.

"Balancing the environmental, social and economic implications of industry like mining is an extremely complex challenge, which is not solved by arbitrary bans or restrictions. Each mining proposal needs to arrive at a robust assessment, based on sound science, which establishes the trade-off between impacts which are acceptable to the wider community against the social and economic benefits which are created by individual projects. This trade-off must be clearly communicated to the community from the outset."

Production in the Southern Coalfield accounted for 10.13 Mt, or 8.3% of NSW's total production of saleable coal in 2004-05, and 10.72 Mt, or 8.6% of NSW's total production of saleable coal in 2005-06 (DPI 2006). This is a significant proportion of the State's total output, and shows the importance of the Southern Coalfield to NSW's coal industry as a whole. The Southern Coalfield provides the only source of hard coking coal in NSW. Hard coking coal is used in blast furnaces during the production of steel.

From June 2000 to June 2006, direct employment in the Southern Coalfield rose 77% from 1,406 to 2,489 (DPI 2006). This figure does not include full-time contractors which make up a significant proportion of the total workforce. This growth in employment shows the strength of the coal mining industry in the Southern Coalfield.

"We recognise that balancing the enormous benefits of mining to the State with its social and environmental impacts is not an easy task. As each proposal is comprised of countless variables including geological conditions, the value of the resource and the views of the community, each project must be assessed on its individual merits, without the prejudice of arbitrary bans on activities created without scientific justification."

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