

7 May 2018

Referrals Gateway
Environment Assessment Branch
Department of the Environment
GPO Box 787
Canberra ACT 2601
By email: epbc.referrals@environment.gov.au

Proposed Action: Alpha North Coal Mine Project

Reference Number: 2018/8189

I am writing on behalf of Greenpeace Australia Pacific (GPAP). Greenpeace is a global independent environmental organisation that uses investigations, advocacy and non-violent creative confrontation to achieve a just and healthy planet. GPAP has around 550,000 supporters whom we engage on a regular basis on matters of public interest. We appreciate the opportunity, under section 74(3), to comment on whether the proposed action should be assessed under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) ("**EPBC Act**").

1. Summary

In summary, our submission states that:

- (a) The proposed action is likely to have a significant and unacceptable impact on a number of matters of national environmental significance, including listed threatened species and ecological communities, water resources, the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, and migratory birds. The proponent has failed to identify impacts on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area and we believe the proponent has provided false and misleading information in support of their application.
- (b) Due to the size of the proposed action (144,000ha development footprint, producing 80 million tonnes of saleable thermal coal per year), and its likely significant impacts on a number of matters of national environmental significance that require a detailed and technical assessment, the proposed action should be fully assessed through an environmental impact statement.
- (c) The proponent has drawn heavily on the environmental impact assessment for the Carmichael Coal and Rail Project from 2010, which suggests that a thorough and up to date assessment has not been undertaken.

2. Background

The proposed Alpha North Project essentially consists of two separate coal mines, each having a saleable tonnage of 40mtpa, with a combined footprint of 144,000ha which the proponent refers to as Mining Area North and Mining Area South. These mining areas each include separate coal handling preparation plants (CHPP), a train load out facility and administration / industrial areas, and would use different railways to access the coal export port of Abbot Point. It is dependent on the development of two railways if it is to be fully built.

- Mining Area North includes four underground longwall mining operations and would include a rail spur linking it to Adani's proposed rail line.

- Mining Area South consists of two open cut operations and four underground longwall mining operations and would include a rail spur linking it to either GVK's or Waratah's proposed rail lines servicing the south of the Galilee Basin.

3. Failure to identify the Action

The Referral refers seven times to assessments undertaken for the Carmichael Coal and Rail Project, twice to assessments undertaken for the China Stone Project, three times to assessments undertaken for the Alpha Coal Project, and four times to assessments undertaken for the Kevin's Corner Coal Project. No project-specific study is referenced in Section 7 of the Referral, indicating that the proponent has relied entirely on assessments conducted for other projects, some of which were undertaken as much as eight years ago, rather than undertaking their own detailed assessment.

The proponent says that it is anticipated the project will be declared a controlled action and that their EIS will provide detailed assessment of specific species (except impact of Port facilities). Despite committing to an EIS, they have not sufficiently described the significant impact the project could have on MNES, and are missing some important controlling provisions – notably the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Additionally, the proponent has failed to refer a component of the action – the off site raw water harvesting scheme for assessment.

Species management plans and species identification can change markedly over time, and as such, to rely on dated environmental assessments is insufficient to provide the Department with enough information to conduct an assessment under the EPBC Act.

4. Listed threatened species and ecological communities

The Referral identifies a number of listed threatened species and ecological communities and migratory species that are likely to be impacted by the project, including the Brigalow EEC, Weeping Myall Woodlands EEC, the Southern Black-throated Finch, the Australian Painted Snipe, and the Koala. Additionally, the proponent identifies potential impacts on the Curlew Sandpiper, which is critically endangered. Critically endangered species are species that can sustain no further loss and are at the brink of extinction, and as noted by the Senate Inquiry into Biodiversity Offsets in 2013, projects impacting on critically endangered ecological communities and species are not suitable for offsets and therefore developments should not be allowed to occur where critically endangered species exist. Impacts on critically endangered species which may result in species extinction are unacceptable impacts. Crucially, the proponent has failed to adequately describe the impact on the Curlew Sandpiper.

The project has not acknowledged impacts on the Cudmore National Park, which should be acknowledged because although national parks are not MNES, they provide habitat for MNES.

5. A water resource in relation to a large coal mining development

The proponent has acknowledged that the project is likely to have a significant impact on groundwater, which is critically important for agriculture and ecological flows. Furthermore, the proponent has not noted impacts on the Yukunna Kumoo Springs Complex and the Hector Springs Complex which abut the project. In the absence of a hydro-geological study, it is not possible for

the proponent to claim that there will not be impacts on these springs. In addition, given the significant scale of the project (27 times the size of Sydney Harbour, the largest project of its type ever proposed in Australia), it is unlikely that the project will not have unacceptable impacts on a water resource. For example, the Maules Creek Coal Mine is less than one fifth the size of the Alpha North Project but is already leading to extensive dewatering of surrounding aquifers. The project also comes within 200 metres of the eastern part of the Doongmabulla Mound Springs Nature Refuge, which should have been acknowledged because following the precautionary principle, projects should assume impacts on surrounding water systems unless a detailed hydro-geological study has taken place, which is not the case in this instance.

The proponent must be required to complete a detailed assessment of the impacts of mining on all Groundwater Dependent Ecosystems (GDEs) including the Doongumbulla Springs complex. The IAR for the project states that it will be dependent on infrastructure from neighboring projects including the Galilee Coal Mine Project, Carmichael Coal Mine and Rail Project and Alpha Coal Project indicating the need for basin wide cumulative impact assessment of groundwater and surface water across all projects.

The proponent has indicated that it will require “Raw water supply for potable water production, firefighting, coal dust suppression and coal washing;”¹ however the proponent has completely failed to identify the total quantity of raw water that the project will require from the local catchment (Belyando Basin Sub catchment E) and the impact that raw water harvesting will have on that catchment in the impact table 2.9.1.

Further reference in the IAR states:

The water supply for Mining Area North will consist of mine water obtained from dewatering the underground workings, with make up water secured through the NGWS being developed by Adani. Should the NGWS not progress, water harvesting from the Belyando River or a pipeline to Burdekin Falls Dam will be considered.²

The off-lease water supply for the project must be assessed under the water trigger to ensure that all potential water impacts of the project are assessed. The Alpha North Project is a component of a larger action that includes the water harvesting scheme and we recommend that the action not be accepted on this basis.³

6. Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

The indirect impacts of the proposed action are likely to have a significant impact on the world heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. However, neither the Referral nor the IAR addresses these impacts.

Furthermore, the proponent claims that the project will not have ANY impact on the world heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef. Given that it is now possible to attribute granular sea

¹ Australian Government, Department of Environment and Energy, ‘Submission #3241 - Alpha North Coal Mine Project - Galilee Basin Queensland’ (Advertised for comment 20 April 2018) 2.

² See *Waratah Coal* ‘North Galilee Coal Project: Initial Advice Statement’ (1 April 2018) Ch 3.3.7.

³ *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) s 74A(1).

level rise, and temperature increase (and therefore changes in ocean acidity) to individual polluters (Ekwurzel et al, *Climatic Change*, October 2017), this statement is inconsistent with current evidence. In that regard we maintain that the proponent has provided false and misleading information to the Department.

First, coal from the proposed action will be shipped through the World Heritage Area, from ports located on the World Heritage Area coast. The impacts of this shipping are indirect impacts of the proposed action, as they are facilitated by the proposed action and must reasonably be within the contemplation of the proponent. Industrial shipping may cause impacts that degrade, damage, or diminish the world heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. For example, ship strikes are known to kill or injure animals that contribute to the Reef's world heritage values, such as whales, turtles, and dolphins. Indo-Pacific humpback and Australian snubfin dolphins – both of which are assessed by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority to be highly vulnerable – are particularly vulnerable to ship strike as they come to the surface to breathe. Also, the light and noise caused by industrial shipping may disrupt the behavioural patterns – such as feeding and breeding – of such animals. Industrial shipping also carries the risk of accidents or spills of pollutants within the World Heritage Area that may impact its world heritage values. Given that the world heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef are deteriorating, and that the port through which the coal will be shipped is not identified in the IAR, the proponent cannot reasonably conclude that the proposed action will not have a significant impact on the world heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Second, the development and operation of the proposed action will emit greenhouse gases, as will the use of the coal that would be produced by the proposed action. The emissions from the use of the coal are facilitated by the proposed action, the sole purpose of which is to produce coal for sale to the market, and must reasonably be within the contemplation of the proponent. The emissions from, and facilitated by, the proposed action contribute to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, fueling the climate change that is already harming the Reef's world heritage values. Given the existing and ongoing deterioration of the Reef's world heritage values resulting from the impacts of climate change, and the contribution of the proposed action to the accumulation of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere, it is likely that the proposed action will have a significant impact on the world heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Given the size of the project, and the fact that Scope 3 greenhouse emissions will amount to some 31% of Australia's domestic emissions per year, it is absolutely unreasonable for the proponent to claim that there will be no impacts at all on the Great Barrier Reef. Whether it crosses the significance threshold (and we maintain that it does) is one thing, but to claim no impacts at all is another matter entirely. The Significant Impact Guidelines make clear that a lack of scientific certainty is no reason not to take consideration of a likelihood of significant impact on MNES.

7. Cumulative impact assessment

The proponent has failed to undertake a cumulative impact assessment of the impact of this project and the other proposed and approved projects in the region on matters of national environmental significance as required. We believe this is important because a cumulative impact assessment would indicate that this project would not just have significant impacts, but unacceptable ones. This project on its own will impact on at least eleven threatened fauna

species, and at least ten ecosystems of concern, therefore the cumulative impact of all projects would render the impacts unacceptable.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The available information demonstrates that the proponent has failed to conduct its own assessment of impacts on matters of national environmental significance that the proposed action would impact, including listed threatened species and ecological communities, and the proposed action is likely to have a significant and unacceptable impact on a number of matters of national environmental significance. Accordingly, the Minister should declare that the project is clearly unacceptable and refuse to apply an exemption under the EPBC Act. In any event, the proponent should be required to undertake their own assessment in any future referral. If it is declared a controlled action, the EIS should thoroughly address those MNES that were missed in the IAS.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions regarding this submission.

Kind regards,

Jonathan Moylan
Campaigner
Greenpeace Australia Pacific
By email: jonathan.moylan@greenpeace.org