

CRC Submission to Minerals and Energy resources (Financial Provisioning) Bill 2018

I grew up in Rockhampton, and in my youth, my father would always take interstate visitors on a trip to nearby Mt Morgan. The mine was operational in those days and he would proudly point out “the largest open cut mine in the southern hemisphere”. Whether that was true or not I was never sure but it was certainly a huge hole busily being expanded by digging equipment and a fleet of trucks.

My father died last year and as were sorting out his things, we found more recent photographs of the Mt Morgan pit, no longer working, containing a considerable quantity of water. Dad’s caption read “the old open cut pit at Mt Morgan. The water is very acidic and toxic”.

My father’s change of attitude may have had a bit to do with his watching our protracted battle, more than two decades ago, to ensure the rehabilitation of the (then) recently abandoned Agricola gold mine in the Conondale Ranges in the Sunshine Coast hinterland.

As President of the (then) Conondale Range Committee, I was part of a Consultative Committee set up by then Mines Minister Tony McGrady to finalise the mine’s rehabilitation at government expense. We had been lobbying the government for a number of years prior to this commitment and it was only the thesis of an Honours student, Zachary Casley, that examined just what exactly was dissolved in those attractively blue waters of the pit that seemed to galvanise the department into action.

While the initial concern had been about cyanide in the tailings dam reaching the pristine Booloumba creek immediately below, it was plain that the water in the open mine pit posed risks of its own. He found that the pH in the pit was “around 3” and this acidification had resulted in a whole suite of heavy metals being mobilised from the surrounding geology and dissolved in the water.

For this reason the Conondale Range Conservation Association (name change) strongly opposes any attempts to weaken the Minerals and Energy Resources (Financial Provisioning) Bill 2018 to allow voids, however contoured in the name of “safety”, to remain following any rehabilitation process.

We heartily commend the government on facing up to the sad inherited legacy of abandoned mine sites. While there are those, both in the industry and among its supporters who promulgate water-filled old voids as havens for wildlife, “artificial waterholes” if you like, the reality is that the geological disturbance that has occurred in the mining process doesn’t end with the cessation of activities and may well cause ongoing acidification and, depending on the geology, gradual mobilisation of heavy metals.

It is not just the weakening of this proposed legislation that concerns us though. We note that the recent approval for an open cut Colton coal mine between Maryborough and Hervey Bay permitted the leaving of a void up to 110ha in footprint and up to 50 metres deep and containing soils with acid –forming potential. As the proposed pit is in low lying country near the mouth of the Mary River and just 12km from the ecologically significant Great Sandy Strait, there is enormous potential for environmental harm well beyond the eight year anticipated life span of the mine.



Ian Mackay

(President)

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