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Submission on the Vulcan Coal Mine EA and PRCP amendment application (A-AE-AMD-100175487)

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission in response to the application by Queensland Coking Coal Pty Ltd (**QCC**) to amend the Environmental Authority (**EA0002912**) and the Progressive Rehabilitation and Closure Plan (**PRCP**) for the Vulcan Coal Mine (**the Project**) under the *Environmental Protection Act 1994* (Qld) (**the Act**).

Environmental Advocacy in Central Queensland

Environmental Advocacy in Central Queensland (**EnvA**) is a Central Queensland association concerned about the environmental risks associated with coal mining, coal seam gas and climate change.

EnvA believes that opening new and expanding coal and gas projects:

- is contrary to meeting Australia's emission targets and Queensland's emission targets,
- is likely to result in irreparable damage to our local landscape and result in stranded assets,
- will put our local community at further risk of extreme weather such as increasing the intensity and frequency of storms, floods, droughts and bushfires,
- will damage our significant coastal resources including our beaches and the Great Barrier Reef through storm surge and increased coral bleaching events,
- will further degrade wildlife habitats of state and national significance through both habitat loss and climate change, and
- rarely take into consideration the views of Traditional Owners and local communities who are concerned about protecting their land from fossil fuel development.

The Project

The proposed Project is to amend the EA and PRCP to incorporate a coal handling and preparation plant, train load-out facility, dedicated rail loop, and small open pit on ML700060, located in Central Queensland, north-west of Dysart. Ancillary infrastructure will also be required, which includes product stockpiles, updated water management infrastructure, access roads and several minor amendments to existing infrastructure layouts. The proposed activities require amendments to the EA and PRCP Schedule.

Vitrinite Pty Ltd (Vitrinite) is the owner of Queensland Coking Coal Pty Ltd (QCC) and Queensland Coal Aust. No. 1 Pty Ltd (QCA1), which hold the coal tenure associated with the Vulcan Coal Mine (VCM). For the purposes of this application, QCC is the proponent of the proposed action.

EnvA strongly opposes the application by QCC to amend the EA and PRCP for the Vulcan Coal Mine for the reasons outlined below.



GROUNDS FOR SUBMISSION

Referral of the Project under the Environmental Protection Biodiversity Act (EPBC Act)

Section 25 of the [EA amendment application](#) submitted identifies that the Project will have a significant impact on Matters of National Environmental Significance (MNES), but also identifies that it hasn't been referred for assessment.

We note that the Project was referred to the federal government under the EPBC Act ([EPBC Number 2022/09361](#)) in November 2022 and suggest that the application is not accurate in this respect. The federal government's referral decision remains active with no approval yet provided.

We consider that it would be inappropriate to approve amendments to the EA and PRCP without first establishing whether the federal government requires an Environmental Impact Assessment and instigates the bilateral approval process.

The fragmentation of projects to avoid environmental scrutiny and community input

Vitrinite, QCC and QCA1 are progressively expanding the Vulcan Coal Complex in steps which do not meet the guidelines for the Queensland government to require an EIS based on the triggers listed in Appendix B to the [Criteria for environmental impact statements for resource projects under the Environmental Protection Act 1994](#).

Vulcan Coal Mine

In 2021, the Queensland Government granted a mining lease to Vulcan Coal Mine to produce 1.95mtpa of coal, without an EIS. This mine was referred and assessed under the EPBC Act and was approved with conditions by the former government's Environment Minister Sussan Ley. It was also granted an EA by the Queensland government and did not have to undergo an Environmental Impact statement (EIS), because it was under the threshold of extracting more than 2 million tonnes of coal each year.

Minister Ley [published a statement of reasons](#) for making her decision to approve the project. The statement of reasons says the project will result in the clearance of over 200 hectares of koala habitat and adversely affect habitat critical to the survival of the species. Habitat fragmentation, direct mortality and vehicle collisions were identified as impacts.

Minister Ley approved the project on the condition that Vitrinite make a payment of \$35,000 to fund a Bowen Basin Koala conservation program. Other conditions put in place to mitigate impacts on koalas prohibit QCC from clearing outside of the project area and require the establishment of a koala habitat offset area. These conditions are unlikely to contribute any meaningful conservation outcomes for the species that would balance the loss of habitat from the coal mine.

Vulcan South Coal mine

In 2022, a mining lease application (MLA 700073) and EA (A-EA-NEW-100265025) for the Vulcan South coal mine were lodged. QCC plans to produce 13.5 million tonnes of ROM coal at a rate of 1.95 million tonnes per annum. This mine also was not required to produce an EIS.

[Supporting information for the EA application](#) states that over 1000ha of koala habitat and over 70ha of greater glider habitat will be cleared. Other threatened species that either occur, or are likely to occur on the site include the ornamental snake, squatter pigeon, short-beaked echidna, northern quoll, white-throated needletail and rufous fantail will be impacted. In addition, the glossy black cockatoo was recorded despite the species not being flagged as present in the region.

It is unclear to EnvA on whether this project has, or is intended to be referred for assessment under the EPBC Act.

The current Project

The proposed project is to add a coal handling and preparation plant, train load-out facility, dedicated rail loop, a small open pit on ML700060. Ancillary infrastructure will also be required, which includes product stockpiles, updated water management infrastructure, access roads and several minor amendments to existing infrastructure layouts.

This proposed mine extension footprint will cover approximately 93 ha of the 407.46 ha mining lease area. Vitrinite acknowledges that this mine expansion may change the magnitude of impacts to MNES, specifically identifying listed threatened species and communities and hence has referred the project for assessment under the EPBC Act.

The Vulcan Complex as a whole

To the Queensland government, Vitrinite/QCC presents these as three separate resource projects, despite Vitrinite presenting them as a single Vulcan Complex project on their website. This results in the avoidance of an EIS because of the manner in which DES applies the EP Act.

Sections 143 and 228 of the EP Act describe the circumstances under which a resource activity must or may be assessed by EIS. The EP Act requires that the standard criteria must be considered when making this decision about whether to require an EIS. The Guideline then seeks to provide assistance to the decision makers in discharging that duty.

The Guideline expressly states that the triggers (or, EIS thresholds) at Appendix B should not be treated as the determining factor when making decisions about whether an EIS should be required.

For example, page 3 of the Guideline states:

“...if no EIS triggers are met, this does not provide an exemption from having to prepare an EIS if the department considers other matters listed above are relevant, e.g. that there may be a significant environmental impact, or there is a high level of uncertainty about the possible impacts, or unacceptable cumulative impacts, or there is a high level of public interest in the proposal.”

Without an EIS process, the community has a significantly reduced opportunity to provide public comment of proposals. Even QCC notes in [their amendment application](#) that the Vulcan Coal Mine (VCM) “has been through a number of state and federal approval processes that have included public review and comments processes. No public comments have been received on any application or approval process associated with the VCM”, and suggested that public notification is not considered required for their EA amendment application, despite the Project impacting on important regional environmental values.

Our regional community is [interested in having a voice on proposals](#) that will impact us and our environment, but the EA process is not user-friendly, it is difficult to locate the relevant documents and usually does not provide the opportunity to seek clarification or more information within the timeframe provided for comment.

Significant impact on listed threatened species

QCC anticipates that the project will be assessed as a controlled action due to significant direct impacts on the koala, greater glider and southern squatter pigeon. The koala and greater glider have recently moved from vulnerable to endangered in Central Queensland as a result of habitat clearing and climate change driven extreme weather.

QCC has also recorded two migratory species in the vicinity of the Project area and a further eight that are likely to use the Project area, but conclude that the impacts are expected to be minimal on these species.

EnvA believes that the direct impacts on these listed species alone is a reason for this Project to be refused as clearly unacceptable, or in the alternative it should be subject to a detailed EIS to fully understand the environmental impacts associated with the Vulcan Complex expansion.

Significant impact of GHG emissions

The referral does not contain information about the greenhouse gas (**GHG**) emissions for Vulcan coal or the additional emissions that would result from the current infrastructure installation. However, it is clear that any fossil fuel extraction and subsequent use of the product contributes to accelerated climate change.

The Australian and Queensland Government has emission reduction targets in place and are taking steps to meet these targets. For Queensland, these targets will need to be improved to meet the requirements of hosting the climate positive 2032 Olympic games. New and expanding coal mines will not help meet any of these targets and ambitions, nor make Queensland look cooperative on the world-stage.

Australia, and of particular concern to EnvA, Central Queensland (where this mine is proposed), is already experiencing climate change impacts that include an increased frequency and severity of coral bleaching, storms, heat waves and wildfires, and an increase in the number of endangered species and ecosystems. If warming increases to 1.5°C and above, these impacts will increase in severity.

The Vulcan Complex GHG emissions and resulting contribution to climate change will also have a [significant impact on these and other threatened species and communities](#). These impacts need to be adequately addressed in an Environmental Impact Statement assessment process.

The Proposed Action's GHG emissions and resulting contribution to climate change will have a significant impact on the environment in the Great Barrier Reef (**the Reef**). The impacts on the Reef of global warming increasing above 2°C have been predicted with very high confidence to include annual bleaching which will result in 'widespread decline and loss of structural integrity'.¹

In addition, the submission that the Project will have a significant impact on the Reef is strongly supported by the [State Party Report on the state of conservation of the Australia's Great Barrier Reef](#), as well as by a Position Statement released by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in 2019, which notes that:

"Climate change is the greatest threat to the Great Barrier Reef. Only the strongest and fastest possible actions to decrease global greenhouse gas emissions will reduce the risks and limit the impacts of climate change on the Reef. Further impacts can be minimised by limiting global temperature increase to the maximum extent possible and fast-tracking actions to build Reef resilience".

EnvA believes that the direct impacts on our lifestyle and the Reef are reasons for this Project to be refused as clearly unacceptable, or in the alternative it should be subject to a detailed EIS to fully understand the significant and cumulative impacts associated with the Vulcan Complex expansion.

Significant Impact on Water Resources

EnvA believes that the potential to impact surface water resources through direct disturbance associated with open cut mining, diversion of drainage features, creation of new temporary and permanent landforms that affect flood waters and through release of water to the surrounding environment.

The Project also has the potential to impact groundwater resources through direct interaction with aquifers by open cut mining and indirect take from adjacent aquifers due to changes in hydraulic gradients. Potential impacts to groundwater resources may include: potential drawdown of

¹ IPCC, 2022: Technical Summary. In *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, p 25.

groundwater aquifers, alteration of groundwater flow directions and decrease in baseflow to surface water systems; localised effects on groundwater quality; and long-term changes to groundwater levels and flow direction in the vicinity of final voids.

Coal mine water releases are regulated through Environmental Authorities, although the cumulative impacts from multiple mines of these releases is not considered. While Vitrinite's modelling suggests that there will be no water spills to the receiving environment, this modelling does not adequately take into account the extreme wet seasons exacerbated by climate change. Just in the last wet season, there have been [multiple and concurrent mine water releases](#) from up to five mines within the same catchment area. New and expanding coal mines will result in further simultaneous releases directly flowing into the Reef catchment area.

RECOMMENDATION

The direct impacts to listed species through clearing of habitat, combined with the GHG emissions from this expanding mine complex, will have a significant impact on many environmental values and needs to be thoroughly assessed through an Environmental Impact Statement.

We urge you to await a decision from the federal government about assessment requirements under the EPBC Act before progressing the assessment of QCC's Project.

If the federal government decides not to commence the bilateral assessment process, we urge you to require QCC to prepare an EIS for the entire Vulcan Complex to fully investigate the environmental impacts of the whole Project and not allow them to use the loopholes in the Queensland government's assessment process.

The PRCP should not be allowed to proceed piece-meal and requires a plan which encompasses the whole Vulcan complex and be prepared for each individual component.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make comment on this Project.

Kind regards



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Director
Environmental Advocacy in Central Queensland Inc.