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RE: Draft Public Environment Report: Gregory Crinum Coal Mine M-Block Extension Project (EPBC 2021/9127)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Environmental Report for the Gregory Crinum Coal Mine M-Block Extension Project (**The Project**) for Sojitz Blue Pty Ltd (**The proponent**).

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

EnvA believes that opening new or expanding existing 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.

EnvA is strongly opposed to the M-Block Extension of the Gregory Crinum Coal Mine. We have significant concerns about the adequacy of the draft Public Environment Report which are outlined in our comments below.

Project Overview

The Proponent seeks approval to continue the existing Gregory Crinum coal mine (GCM) through the development of M-Block located within mining lease 1923 (ML). The project is located approximately 50km northeast of Emerald, in the Bowen Basin, Central Queensland.

The project will use conventional open-cut mining methods for the first three years, with underground access to be established from the highwall. The total area of the M-Block footprint is 2,441.3 ha, with the total impact area of 1,710.5 ha. This comprises 296.4 ha of open cut impact area and 1,414.1 ha of underground mining. The Proponent has estimated that the mine would be in production until 2049.



The proposal was submitted under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) to the Minister for the Environment (the Minister) on 20 December 2021 and validated on 24 January 2022 (2021/9127).

On 23 February 2022, the delegate of the Minister decided that further assessment is required as the action has the potential to have a significant impact on the following matters of national environmental significance (MNES):

- Listed threatened species and communities (sections 18 and 18A), and
- A water resource, in relation to coal seam gas development and large coal mining development (sections 24D and 24E).

A delegate of the Minister made the decision that the proposed action be assessed by Public Environment Report (PER).

Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Climate Change

The scientific consensus is clear that expansion of fossil fuel production must be stopped in order to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and avoid the potentially catastrophic impacts of unmitigated global warming and climate change.¹

The draft PER does not clearly include the proposed volume of coal to be extracted, but only notes that GCM currently produces about 2 million tonnes per annum of coking coal.

Australia and Queensland have set emission reduction targets and requirements for all existing and proposed coal mines to decarbonise their operations to meet these targets. The draft PER provides no assessment of the greenhouse gas emissions, mitigation measures or details on how this project will impact on meeting the Paris Agreement for emission reductions, the methane management agreement and emission targets.

The Project will contribute to global greenhouse gas emissions, and it is essential that this be thoroughly assessed in the PER.

Recommendation

That the proponent include further information in the PER on the estimated emissions including at a minimum:

- Estimated annual coal extraction from the expansion,
- Detailed assessment of the quality of the coal,
- Estimates of Scope 1, Scope 2 and Scope 3 emissions using the most accurate estimation tools available,
- Details on how this Project can meet Australia and Queensland emission reduction targets without impacting on industries of the future, and
- Steps that will be taken to decarbonise the operation.

Biodiversity and Habitat Impacts

The Project is located in the Brigalow Belt Bioregion, one of 13 bio-geographical areas of Queensland.

Extensive clearing has occurred in the Brigalow Belt for agriculture and mining, particularly in the Bowen Basin. The cumulative impacts of the removal of habitat is impacting on species and communities and must be detailed through a rigorous assessment which currently not evident in the draft PER.

¹ [“Production Gap Report 2020,”](#) UNEP, December 2020

Table 4.2 in the draft PER detail historic and contemporary field assessments on the project area. The more recent studies of the Project area (within the last 5 years) were:

- Cardno (2021) conducted surveys in October 2020 and April 2021. This was a very dry time in Central Queensland and may not reflect an accurate assessment of the terrestrial ecology.
- Stantec (2022) conducted surveys in May 2022. Two surveys were completed in the same month and hence did not pick up seasonality changes associated with detecting plants and animals.

Flora

The Threatened Ecological Communities (TECs), under the EPBC Act, recorded within the M-Block extension area include:

- Brigalow (*Acacia harpophylla* dominant and codominant), (Brigalow TEC), and
- Natural Grasslands of the Queensland Central Highlands and northern Fitzroy Basin (Grassland TEC).

The threatened flora species king bluegrass (*Dichanthium queenslandicum*) was also identified in large numbers in numerous locations in M-Block. This species is listed as endangered under the EPBC Act and Vulnerable under the Nature Conservation Act 1992 (Qld) (NC Act)

Fauna

Threatened fauna species known to use these key habitat areas and the Brigalow woodland and open forest include:

- Short-beaked Echidna (*Tachyglossus aculeatus*).
- Squatter Pigeon (*Geophaps scripta scripta*).

Earlier assessments concluded that a number of other threatened fauna species had the potential to occur, including:

- Yakka skink (*Egernia rugosa*).
- Dunmall's snake (*Furina dunmalli*).
- Ornamental snake (*Denisonia maculata*).
- Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*).

All remaining vegetation, remnant or regrowth, is significant to species survival in a highly disturbed landscape. This project will result in further habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation which could restrict dispersal, further isolate populations, result in genetic fragmentation and increase habitat degradation from edge effects. Australia, and Queensland in particular is currently experiencing an extinction crisis and any clearing of vegetation will likely have negative effects on threatened species.

Recommendations

That the proponent assesses and provides further information on the cumulative impacts on threatened plants, animals and ecosystems.

Offsets

Offsets are typically of minimal success, short duration, and certainly do not address the cumulative impacts from the loss and disturbance of habitat in areas such as the Bowen Basin.

The significant biodiversity impacts are proposed to be dealt with through offsets as set out in the '[MNES Biodiversity Offsets Strategy](#)'. EnvA is concerned that the proposed offsets are not suitable as the proposed offsets appear to involve 'averted loss' offsets, whereby areas of existing habitat are allegedly preserved to compensate for the destruction of habitat elsewhere. Such averted loss offsets are widely considered to be ineffective and have recently been explicitly rejected by the Federal Government.

EnvA believes that this is an unsuitable offset that does not effectively provide for quality habitat for threatened ecosystems and species.

Recommendation

That the Proponent prepares a detailed and justified offset management strategy which adequately compensates the significant loss of threatened species and communities, and the fragmentation of movement corridors along waterways.

Social, cultural and human rights impacts

The Public Environmental Report falls short in addressing the possible social and cultural impacts of the Project's negative social effects have been avoided or reduced.

First Nations Peoples are the primary custodians and knowledge holders of their cultural heritage. The principles of free, prior and informed consent and self-determination must be at the core of any assessment of the impact of the Project on cultural heritage.

It is imperative that all First Nations People whose cultural heritage may be impacted by the Project are included the assessment of cultural heritage impacts. It must be recognised that some relevant First Nations People are not recognised in the Native Title system, but may have cultural interests that will be directly or indirectly impacted by the Project (i.e. song-lines or totem animals).

Impacts on cultural heritage are not limited to the physical landscape or restricted solely to 'sacred sites' and any assessment of impacts on cultural heritage must also include impacts on cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices.

This Project will contribute emissions which will exacerbate the negative impacts of climate change which is already affecting Central Queensland in the form of increased duration and frequency of heatwaves, bushfires, storms coral bleaching events. This risks the health of all people in our region, especially outdoor workers and those who have underlying health issues.

We also refer you to the recommendation in [Waratah Coal Pty Ltd v Youth Verdict Ltd & Ors \(No 6\) \[2022\]](#). President Kingham found that the local and climate change impacts on Queenslanders resulting from the approval of operation of a coal mine would have unacceptable impacts on human rights including: the right to life, cultural rights, right to equality, rights of children and rights to property and privacy. These rights were engaged by the impacts on Queensland through climate change, and for property and privacy rights, the local impacts on the affected landholders.

Recommendation

That the Proponent:

1. Identifies the Traditional Owners and other First Nations Peoples who may be affected by the project and works with them to clearly describe any potential impacts on Indigenous cultural heritage,
2. Identifies and describes any human rights (local and within Australia) likely to be impacted by the Project as a consequence of the construction, operation, and decommissioning of the Project.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Public Environment Report for the Gregory Crinum Coal Mine M-Block Extension Project. We would welcome the opportunity to talk further about your proposed Project or again review your final PER.

Kind regards



Dr Coral Rowston

Director

Environmental Advocacy in Central Queensland