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1 October 2024

Dear Vitrinite,

**RE: Comment on the draft Public Environment Report – Vulcan South Coal Mine – EPBC 2023/09708**

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission in response to the Public Environment Report (PER)<sup>1</sup> for the proposed Vulcan South Coal Mine (**the Project**) by Vitrinite Pty Ltd (**the Proponent**) under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) (EPBC Act).

**Environmental Advocacy in Central Queensland**

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 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, and
- will further degrade wildlife habitats of state and national significance through both habitat loss and climate change.

**The proposed action**

The Proponent is seeking to develop an open cut coal mining development and a smaller highwall mining trial area to further its metallurgical coal mining interest at the Vulcan Coal Complex. The project would be located approximately 35 km south-east of Moranbah, within the Isaac Regional Council in Central Queensland.

The recently approved Project Mining Lease Area (ML 700073) covers an area of approximately 3800 ha and is situated over multiple underlying prerequisite tenures (EPC 1732, 1233 and 1234).

The project disturbance footprint is stated to be approximately 1476.4 ha.

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<sup>1</sup> [21 August 2024. Public Environment Report – Vulcan South Coal Mine \(2023/09708\)](#)



The proposed Project will operate for approximately nine years, including primary rehabilitation works, following a two-year construction period. Approximately 13.5 Mt of ROM coal will be extracted consisting predominately of hard coking coal (with an incidental thermal secondary product) at a rate of up to 1.95 million tonnes per annum (Mtpa).

The project includes:

- three separate open cut mines identified as Vulcan North, Vulcan Main and Vulcan South,
- a highwall mining trial involving the establishment of four highwall mining benches across a number of hillsides,
- a mine infrastructure area,
- a modular coal handling and preparation plant,
- a rail loop and train load-out facility,
- out-of-pit waste rock dumps,
- ancillary infrastructure including offices, roads and surface water management infrastructure, and
- the realignment of the existing Saraji Road and services infrastructure.

## **ENVA'S SUBMISSION**

### **Summary of concerns and recommendations**

EnvA considers that the Project must be rejected as it would result in:

- significant impacts on threatened species and communities,
- impacts on local water quality and volumes within the largest catchment flowing to the Great Barrier Reef,
- increased greenhouse gas emissions fuelling more frequent and extreme weather events and the consequent impacts on Australia's natural environment and the people that live here.

We also have concerns that the Proponent is still claiming that the Project is not part of a staged development, and hence has avoided the scrutiny of an environmental assessment of the entire Vulcan Complex coal mine. It is clear the three 'distinct' projects that have been referred for EPBC assessment are a staged development and recommend that the Vulcan Complex, Matilda Pit and infrastructure, and Vulcan South must be considered as one large project when assessing the impacts on Matters of National Environmental Significance (MNES).

EnvA's further evidence in relation to this being a staged development is the proposed export of coal product (detailed in section 2.2.5 of the PER) through the Matilda Pit and Infrastructure project which is located within the initial Vulcan Complex Project. The claim that they are separate distinct projects is highly misleading and inaccurate.

We also note that the PER has been updated since the referral for assessment under the EPBC Act (section 1.1 of the PER) and the granting of an Environmental Authority (P-EA-100265081)<sup>2</sup>, and is now seeking approval to clear greater areas of threatened species habitat than previously identified for the Project footprint. Despite EnvA's view that this Project must be rejected as it will clearly have significant and unacceptable impacts on the MNES, we strongly recommend that if there is any consideration of providing an approval, the footprint area must be reduced to the maximum extent outlined in the Queensland Government's Environmental Authority.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [Environmental authority P-EA-100265081 Vulcan South Coal Mine](#)

EnvA has had the opportunity to communicate directly with the Proponent since the approval of the Environmental Authority for the Project, but we recommend that the Proponent's past approvals and compliance history is taken into account in considering whether they can be relied on to appropriately operate a Project that will significantly impact on the environment.

Further background information and comments are contained in our previous submissions related to the Vulcan Coal Complex<sup>3 4 5 6 7</sup>. Our further concerns and recommendations are outlined below.

## **GROUND'S FOR SUBMISSION**

### **Significant impact on threatened species and communities**

As noted by the Proponent in the PER, this Project will have significant residual impacts on threatened species and communities including direct impacts on:

- 71.2ha of brigalow,
- 1219ha of squatter pigeon habitat,
- 1167ha of koala habitat (noting that the Queensland Government's EA approval allows for only 770ha of koala to be cleared),
- 1056 ha of greater glider habitat, and potentially
- Over 1000ha of potential ornamental snake habitat.

These areas of residual impacts are significantly different to the previous reports provided in the Proponent's EA application and the referral for EPBC assessment. A summary of the discrepancies is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. Examples of the areas of MNES previously determined by the Proponent**

MNES	PER (ha)	EPBC referral (ha)	EA application (ha)	EA approval (ha)
Brigalow	71.2	71.2	124	67
Squatter pigeon	1219	543	1400	1023.5
Koala	1167	883	1023	770.4
Greater glider	1056	50.7	71.1	39.4
Ornamental snake	>1000	100.5	107.5	-

EnvA considers that these are significant discrepancies and hence it is not clear of the 'real' impact on MNES from the Proponent's studies and documentation. We also consider that if the EA and referral documents were incorrect (and the PER is correct), this Project must be refused and the Proponent's intent to progress through the approval process using misleading information is investigated.

We further recommend that the Proponent is required to resubmit an application for an approval that includes all components of the Vulcan Coal Complex to accurately reflect the impacts that this mine will have on the environment. The cumulative impact of the three separate sub-projects of this coal mine complex is significant and deserves the highest level of scrutiny.

<sup>3</sup> [Vulcan Coal Mine Ancillary Infrastructure – EPBC referral 2022/09361](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Vulcan Coal Mine – Environmental Authority amendment](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Vulcan South coal – mining lease application](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Vulcan South coal – environmental authority application](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Vulcan South Coal Mine – EPBC referral](#)

The combined projects would result in the clearing of more than 1400 ha of koala habitat as well as significant areas of habitat for threatened species including greater glider, glossy black-cockatoo, squatter pigeon and ornamental snake. They would also remove up to 71 ha of the endangered Brigalow threatened ecological community. The Bowen Basin is a highly cleared and fragmented environment.

The pre-clearing cover for the Isaac-Comet Downs subregion is estimated at approximately 2,693,397 ha compared to 570,968 ha that remains (Accad et al. 2023<sup>8</sup>). Therefore, 78.8% of vegetation cover has already been cleared in this Brigalow Belt subregion which means that any further habitat clearing or disturbance is highly likely to result in significant impact on threatened species and ecosystems.

EnvA recommends that the project does not proceed as it will have a clearly unacceptable impacts on threatened species and communities.

### **Significant Impact on Water Resources**

Vitrinite had previously determined that the Project and its associated effects on water resources are of a limited scale and duration. The Independent Expert Scientific Committee (IESC)<sup>9</sup> advised that the Proponent's assessment was insufficient to determine the impacts on water resources and provided recommendations.

Despite the IESC advice, the Proponent still has not provided adequate monitoring, mitigation and management measures in either the groundwater or surface water reports. 'Adaptive management' is used as a cover where the appropriate management measures have not been considered upfront but can be added during mine operation, if and when issues arise. It is not the intent of adaptive management to devise mitigation measures on an as needed basis; rather it is a means of modifying existing mitigation measures to adapt to changing conditions.

We also note that the Proponent does not good have a good record in protecting and managing water resources as is detailed below.

### **Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions**

The GHG emissions from the Project are estimated to be 25,019ktCO<sub>2</sub>-e over the life of the mine, with 96% of this total being Scope 3 emissions. While these emissions levels maybe relatively small when compared to other nearby coal mines, it is very clear that any additional CO<sub>2</sub> will contribute further to increased global temperatures and the associated extreme weather events being experienced across Australia. The Project will emit GHG emissions which will cumulatively increase global temperature and result in adverse impacts to MNES.

EnvA considers that the splitting of the larger Vulcan Complex project into three projects may be taking an advantage of the current Safeguard Mechanism reporting requirements. It appears from the many applications and approvals that all three projects (if approved) will overlap in coal mining operations and should be assessed for the purposes of the Safeguard Mechanism as combined greenhouse gas emissions.

We also consider that the there are no decarbonisation measures proposed and no details on how this project can align with the legislated emission reduction targets.

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<sup>8</sup> Accad, A. Kelley, J.A.R., Richter, D., Li, J., Neldner, V.J. and Ryan T.S. (2023). *Remnant Regional Ecosystem Vegetation in Queensland (Version 13.0), Analysis 1997-2021*. Queensland Department of Environment and Science: Brisbane.

<sup>9</sup> [IESC 2024-149: Vulcan South Coal Mine Project \(EPBC 2023/09708\) – Expansion](#)

## **The Proponent's previous environmental breaches**

### Water management

The Queensland Government issued an Environmental Protection Order (**EPO**) to the Proponent on 22 March 2024 in relation to repeated release of contaminated water from the Vulcan Complex mine and inappropriate water monitoring and drainage infrastructure.

The EPO clearly identifies that there were numerous contaminated water releases from the Vulcan Complex mine between November 2022 and March 2023, with the company blaming heavy rainfall and staffing challenges. The EPO also shows that in October 2023, nearly a year following the first reported contamination event, Vitrinite was yet to construct all the infrastructure required as part of its Environmental Authority conditions.

### Clearing of threatened species habitat

The Queensland Department of Environment and Science (**DESI**) issued a Directions Notice to the Proponent on 17 June 2024 in relation to unauthorised clearing outside of the approved area for the Proponent's bulk sampling project (EPPR03277115).

The bulk sampling project is located within the proposed Vulcan South coal mine footprint which does not appear to have been referred for EPBC assessment and hence has no federal approval despite the clearing of 67ha of habitat for threatened species and communities.

Vitrinite's compliance history does not provide EnvA any confidence that our environment (and climate) will be appropriately protected and managed.

EnvA strongly believes that this Project must be refused based on the information provided in our previous submissions on this broader coal mine complex and the comments raised above in relation to the current Project. We believe that our submissions demonstrate that this project will have significant adverse impacts to MNES and compromise Queensland and Australia's emission reduction targets.

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

Kind regards



Dr Coral Rowston  
Director  
Environmental Advocacy in Central Queensland Inc.