

Hon. Andrew Powell

Minister for the Environment and Tourism, and Minister for Science and Innovation

By email: environment@ministerial.qld.gov.au

27 April 2026

Dear Minister Powell,

Coal mine water releases: Management, reporting, monitoring, impacts and transparency

We write regarding the management, reporting, monitoring and cumulative impacts of coal mine water releases in the Fitzroy Basin catchment, the largest catchment flowing to the Great Barrier Reef.

Environmental Advocacy in Central Queensland (EnvA) is concerned that the current regulatory framework for coal mine water releases is no longer fit for purpose. While policy improvements were introduced following the Fitzroy Basin pilot project, the scale and context of mining activity has changed significantly. There are now substantially more mines operating in the catchment, many have expanded in size, and extreme rainfall events are occurring more frequently. During wet seasons, multiple mines are authorised to release mine-affected water simultaneously, yet there is limited assessment of cumulative impacts and restricted transparency for the public.

EnvA considers that the current framework allows large volumes of highly saline mine-affected water to be released to waterways that ultimately discharge to the Great Barrier Reef, without adequate cumulative impact assessment or accessible public reporting.

We have summarised our comments and concerns below.

Coal mine water release management background

Coal mine water release management has improved since the commencement of the *Environmental Protection Act 1994 (EP Act)* when releases became governed by legally enforceable Environmental Authority conditions, rather than ad hoc discharges.

To the Queensland government's credit, Central Queensland – especially the Fitzroy Basin – became the focal point for policy innovation. The 2012 and 2016 pilot project resulted in releases being tied to real-time river flow conditions, increased monitoring and the commencement of catchment-wide coordination.

However, the pilot project involved only four coal mines in the Isaac catchment, and as noted in the 2013 pilot report, there were relatively few and small releases from the four mines under the new



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framework resulting in no measured effects on salinity downstream of the Isaac/Connors confluence.¹

At this time, there were 36 coal mines operating in the Fitzroy Basin catchment, with only four participating in the pilot project. Due to the ‘success’ of the pilot project, it was the government’s intention to work the other coal mines to transition them to the new system.²

EnvA further notes that the Model Mining Conditions Guideline, despite being reviewed in 2024, still states that conditions “may be subject to amendments that are dependent on the outcome of the Isaac River mine water release pilot.” This suggests the current framework continues to rely on a limited and dated pilot study.³

Coal mine water release based on outdated data

EnvA understands that the 2008 extreme flooding event near Emerald which overwhelmed infrastructure at the Ensham Coal mine and challenged other coal mine sites was the impetus for the improvements to legislation and regulation. At that time, the Ensham coal mine was designed for a 1 in 100 year flood event, but the level of flooding far exceeded the capacity of the levee banks.⁴ This resulted in the discharge of 138 Gigalitres of mine-affected floodwater from the mine which put at risks human health, aquatic ecology, industry and the Great Barrier Reef.⁵

Ensham Resources upgraded its levee banks following the flooding to withstand a 1 in a 1,000 year flood event.⁶ However, the region has been faced with major floods again in 2011, 2022 and now 2025-26, and there continue to be highly contaminated water releases from the mine since the upgrade. By way of example, in this last wet season, there have been three reported highly polluted water releases from the Ensham coal mine into the Nogoa River as summarised here:

Water release dates	Ensham release rate (L/s)	Ensham water salinity (µS/cm)	Receiving water flow rate (L/s)	Receiving water salinity (µS/cm)	Compliant
13-15 Jan	4000	9411	191950	143	Yes
16-21 Jan	4000	6452	500000	912	Not specified
9-15 Mar	3000	2616	38000	160	Yes

We note that the Ensham Coal mine continues to release very large amounts of polluted water into the Fitzroy Basin, despite the claims that they are now set up for managing ‘rare’ flood events. From the information that is provided to the public on the Fitzroy Basin coal mine water release

¹ [Gilbert and Sutherland Pty Ltd & Marsden Jacob Associates. \(May 2013\) Improving Mine Water Management For The Fitzroy Basin: Final Report On The Effectiveness Of The 2012-2013 Pilot Mine Water Release & Evaluation Of Market Based Mechanisms](#)

² [Queensland Cabinet \(May 2013\) Joint Statement: Fitzroy mine water strategy](#)

³ [Queensland Government \(2016\) Guideline: Model mining conditions](#)

⁴ [Ensham Resources \(August 2008\). A collaborative approach to recovery from an unprecedented natural event. Presentation to Fitzroy Flood Forum.](#)

⁵ [Professor Barry Hart \(November 2008\). Review of the Fitzroy River Water Quality Issues.](#)

⁶ [ABC News \(December 2010\) Ensham mine avoids repeat of disastrous 2008 floods](#)

website, the total water releases over the two weeks calculates to be a total of approximately 4.3 gigalitres of water. That is about 1680 Olympic-sized swimming pools, or the same amount of water used by 20,000 households for an entire year into an already flooded catchment.

The pilot project which led to improved regulation is now dated and much has changed in the last decade. Weather patterns, in particular, the frequency and severity of extreme weather events has increased at the same time as the number of coal mines simultaneously releasing polluted water into the catchment has significantly increased. At the time of the pilot project, there were 36 coal mines, where-as now there are over 55 and there have been significant expansions to a number of the mines that were operating 13 years ago.

During major rainfall events, multiple mines release simultaneously. In the 2025–26 wet season, at least 25 coal mines released mine-affected water, with 19 mines discharging simultaneously from 26 release points in mid-January.⁷ This highlights the potential for significant cumulative impacts.

These releases demonstrate that mine discharges can materially influence both flow rates and salinity in receiving waters.

EnvA requests that you revisit the dated and limited pilot project and instigate a project to assess the cumulative impacts of coal mine water releases within the framework of:

- more frequent and extreme rainfall events,
- a larger number and greater extent of coal mine activities in the catchment, and
- a greater awareness and scientific knowledge of the need to protect our water resources, waterways and the water quality entering the waters of the Great Barrier Reef.

This should then be used to reshape the regulatory framework to ensure the protection of our waterways and the water quality entering the waters of the Great Barrier Reef.

Reporting of coal mine water releases reported to the public

The management and reporting requirements for coal mine water releases are generally prescribed as conditions of the proponent's Environmental Authority (EA) issued under the EP Act. Generally, these conditions require:

- coal mines are required to measure and report release flow rate and salinity levels for both the water being released and the receiving water when coal mine affected water release events occur,
- details of these releases are required to be recorded daily through real time telemetry when available, or alternatively through daily sampling when safe to do so,
- Proponents provide this information to the Water Tracking and Electronic Reporting System (WaTERS)⁸ which then sends the information to be incorporated into the DETSI Fitzroy Basin Coal Mine Water Release public website.

This reporting framework provides limited transparency on the daily coal mine water releases to the public. The only information that is provided on the Fitzroy Basin coal mine water release website are the release flow rate and salinity levels for both the water being released and the

⁷ [ABC News \(5 February 2026\) Central Queensland conservation group wants to see more transparency on coal mine water releases](#)

⁸ [Queensland government \(July 2025\) Water Tracking and Electronic Reporting System](#)

receiving water the release is at the commencement of a water release with the same details provided each day for the duration of the release – despite some releases lasting several days, weeks or months.

There is no public access to the WaTERS database and hence the public has no information on the total volumes or the release contaminant trigger investigation levels during a release, nor any real time indication of the changes in salinity and volumes during a release.

A recent example is one of the nine Peak Downs coal mine water releases over the past few months. Peak Downs was releasing water from 20 February through to 11 March this year – 19 days of large volumes of highly polluted water into Boomerang Creek which also released water in previous months. Regardless of which day we checked the DETSI website, we were provided with the same information.

Peak Downs mine, BHP Coal	
RP4 release point	
Release start	20 Feb 2026
Notified as compliant?	Yes
Environmental Authority	EPML00318213
Releasing flow rate	4420L/s
Releasing salinity	5592 μ S/cm
Receiving waters	Boomerang Creek
Receiving waters flow rate	1.10m ³ /s
Receiving waters salinity	95 μ S/cm

An example of publicly available information provided daily through a release event

Note the flow rates of the water release compared to the receiving water flow rate (release rate approximately four times higher than the receiving waters), and the salinity of the released water compared to the receiving water salinity (nearly 60 times higher).

EnvA requests that given proponents are required to collect daily water release volumes and salinity for both the released waters and receiving waters, that you:

- instruct DETSI to require updated daily reports from coal mines that are releasing water, and publish these on their website to improve transparency to the public, or
- alternatively, work with the Science unit of department to allow the public to view the data submitted to the WaTERS.

Water quality monitoring and reporting

28 day reports

Coal mining companies that are releasing polluted water are required to submit '28 day' reports which include total release volumes, duration, compliance details, and water quality monitoring results.

These reports are not made publicly available but can be requested through the public register. Unfortunately, sometimes the receipt of these reports can take months to receive which does not provide a level of transparency to assess the resulting waterway contamination. These waterways,

or the receiving coastal waters are where locals recreate, and they support Queensland's tourism and fishing industry.

Receiving Environment Monitoring Program

Coal mines are generally required to develop and implement a Receiving Environment Monitoring Program (**REMP**) as a condition of their EA. These programs are designed to monitor, identify and describe any adverse impacts to surface water environmental values, quality and flows due to the authorised mining activity - including monitoring the effects of the mine on the receiving environment under natural flow conditions and while mine affected water is being discharged from the site. Proponents must prepare an annual report detailing the findings of their REMP, however there are exclusions for participants of the Fitzroy Basin regional REMP.

Some proponents make these reports available on their website, but there is no requirement to do so, and the reports are only made available to the administering authority on request. They are typically not available or easily accessible to the public.

Fitzroy Partnership for River Health

The longer term trends on water quality within the sub-catchments of the Fitzroy Basin are provided each year, but by the time these are released, they are very dated. As an example, the last Fitzroy Basin report card⁹ for the July 2024 – June 2025 timeframe was released early this year. This means that the details of water quality resulting from coal mine water releases are over a year old by the time the public can view them.

For many of the sub-catchments, the Fitzroy Partnership for River Health (**FPRH**) latest report indicate little improvement to river health, despite the recent legislation and regulatory requirements imposed on agricultural and horticultural managers in the Great Barrier Reef catchment.

This raises concerns that the contribution of mining activities to water quality impacts may not be fully reflected in current reporting which is reinforced by the recent data showing an increase in toxicants and the loss of invertebrates in many of the coal mining catchments in the Fitzroy Basin.

EnvA requests that you:

- require DETSI to make public the 28 day reports to allow timely access to these reports,
- require DETSI to improve public accessibility to REMP reports, preferably by including these on the relevant EA page which already has provision of annual returns, TELs, Infringement notices and other reports, and
- suggest to the Fitzroy Partnership for River Health to amend their reporting time frames to enable faster understanding of the cumulative impacts on water quality following the wet season. We suggest that a May to April annual report may be more appropriate.

Compliance and enforcement

EnvA understand that the specific conditions applied to EAs for coal mines that may release water to the environment are developed based on their location in the catchment, the water quality objectives for the catchment and are based in the findings of the ten-year old pilot program.

⁹ [Fitzroy Partnership for River Health \(2026\) Fitzroy Basin Report Card July 2024 – June 2025](#)

However, the increasing use of Temporary Emissions Licences (TEL) allows releases outside standard Environmental Authority conditions¹⁰.

At least 20 TELs have been issued to coal companies in the last four months. One of these was Glencore’s Oaky Creek Coal mine. This mine released water between 12-17 January this year which was compliant with their EA. However, on 3 February, the coal mine applied for a TEL which was extended again on 25 February – and at the time of this correspondence the mine is still releasing water into Oaky Creek.

A summary of Oaky Creek coal mine releases are provided here:

Water release dates	Oaky Creek release rate (L/s)	Oaky Creek water salinity (µS/cm)	Receiving water flow rate (L/s)	Receiving water salinity (µS/cm)	Compliant
12-15 Jan	2400	3919	36300	369	Yes
16-17 Jan	unknown				Yes
4- 25 Feb	1000	9373	3450	526	TEL101027348
25 Feb – still releasing	1000	4169	3650	928	TEL101042719

This mine has been releasing highly polluted coal mine water into Oaky Creek for at least 11 weeks (since 4 February) under its TEL - and the release continues. Under the first TEL, the salinity levels of the released water was nearly 18 times higher than the receiving water and 5 times higher under the second TEL.

While we accept that a ‘dilution factor’ may be a consideration, there has been no significant rainfall for the last two months and the receiving water flow rate has not been updated on the public website since 25 February 2026 and hence it is highly likely that the receiving water flow rate has reduced significantly – but this information is not readily available.

EnvA considers that there is a need to ensure adequate surface water management is considered at the time of application, and that in the case that a TEL is required, it is provided along with a notice to improve their surface water management infrastructure to prevent recurrence of such an event (similar to how Ensham coal mine responded to the extreme flooding event).

We also note that there is limited penalty for coal mining operators if they do not meet the surface water management in accordance with their EA. As an example, Queensland Coking Coal /Qld Coal Australia (operated by Vitrinite) was issued an Environmental Protection Orders (EPO) for failing to meet the surface water management conditions at the Vulcan Coal Mine following eight consecutive exceedance trigger levels of salinity an downstream monitoring locations.¹¹ The proponent was required to take reasonable measures to secure compliance with their EA, but was unable to do so within the time frame and hence the EPO was replaced with a second EPO.¹²

¹⁰ [EnvA \(2026\) Multiple coal mine water releases spark concerns about waterway and Reef health](#)

¹¹ [Environmental Protection order \(22 January 2024\). STAT-E-100527732. Issued to Queensland Coking Coal and QLD Coal Aust No 1.](#)

¹² [Environmental Protection order \(22 March 2024\). STAT-E-100618168. Issued to Queensland Coking Coal and QLD Coal Aust No 1.](#)

Instead of penalties, the proponent received an extension to achieve compliance despite continued impacts to the receiving environment.

EnvA considers that compliance and enforcement mechanisms should include meaningful penalties for breaches, rather than repeated warnings or extensions.

We appreciate the opportunity to raise our concerns about the impact that the coal mining industry is having on the water quality in the largest GBR catchment. Despite the advances on coal mine water release policy, the current regulatory framework is now outdated and is leading to a continued degradation of the environment.

EnvA respectfully requests that the Queensland Government:

- Commission a cumulative impact assessment of coal mine water releases in the Fitzroy Basin under current and projected climate conditions,
- Review and update the regulatory framework for coal mine water releases based on cumulative impacts and increased release volumes,
- Improve transparency by publishing daily release volumes, salinity and receiving water data for the duration of release events,
- Make 28-day reports publicly available in a timely manner,
- Improve public accessibility to Receiving Environment Monitoring Program (REMP) reports
- Review the use of Temporary Emissions Licences and ensure they are not used as a substitute for adequate water management infrastructure, and
- Strengthen Environmental Authority conditions to improve compliance and enforcement for coal mine water releases including updating of the model mining condition guideline.

We appreciate the opportunity to raise these concerns and look forward to your response.

Kind regards,



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