

Hon Murray Watt MP
Minister for the Environment and Water
c/- Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Submitted via the EPBC portal

18 July 2026

Dear Minister,

RE: Submission on Referral – Lake Vermont Mockingbird Metallurgical Coal Project (EPBC 2025/10381)

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission in response to the referral of the Lake Vermont Mockingbird Metallurgical Coal Project (**the Project**) proposed by Bowen Basin Coal Pty Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Jellinbah Group Pty Ltd (**the Proponent**) for assessment under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (**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,
- 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 proposed action

The Project is a proposed extension to the Lake Vermont Mine to access approximately 31 million tonnes (**Mt**) of run of mine (**ROM**) coal over a 15 year operational mine life.

The Project proposes the construction and operation of an open cut coal mine and associated infrastructure within mineral development licence MDL 303 located approximately 25 km northeast of Dysart in central Queensland. The proposed project area is approximately 4,077ha, with a disturbance footprint of approximately 1,615ha.



ENVA'S SUBMISSION

1. EnvA submits that the referral demonstrates that the proposed action is likely to have unacceptable impacts on Matters of National Environmental Significance which cannot presently be avoided, mitigated or offset, and the expansion of this coal project is inconsistent with Australia's legislated emissions reduction targets, international climate obligations and the objectives of the Safeguard Mechanism.
2. In the alternative, EnvA strongly recommends it be declared a controlled action due to significant residual impacts on:
 - Listed threatened species and communities (ss 18 and 18A),
 - Listed migratory species (ss 20 and 20A),
 - Water resources (ss 24D and 24E).

The Department has listed these controlling provisions in the previous application to extend the Lake Vermont Coal Mine.¹

3. We further recommend that if this Project is accepted for assessment, that it be assessed through an environmental impact statement (EIS) process. An EIS assessment would allow:
 - Public input on the terms of reference,
 - Rigorous assessment of species surveys, habitat fragmentation, cumulative impacts, water resources, and climate risks, and
 - Transparency in the evaluation of rehabilitation, offsets, mitigation, and alternatives.

Further detail to support our recommendation is provided below.

GROUNDINGS FOR SUBMISSION

Justification

The Proponent has not provided a strong justification for the Project. There has been no demonstration that avoidance or mitigation has been considered, including 'not taking the action'. The only justification is that the Project has been located to target an economically recoverable coal deposit to maximise economic efficiency.

EnvA further notes that the Proponent has previously applied for an extension to the Lake Vermont Coal Mine through the Lake Vermont Meadowbrook Project (EPBC 2019/8485). EnvA understands that this project has not yet commenced and that all necessary approvals have not yet been granted.

If approved and developed, the Lake Vermont Meadowbrook Project would provide an extended operational life for the existing mine. The referral does not explain why an additional expansion is now required or why the environmental impacts of both projects should be accepted.

The EPBC Act is the national legislation designed to protect MNES while balancing the protection of crucial environmental and cultural values with society's economic and social needs. Ecological sustainable development is the fundamental basis for decision-making.²

EnvA considers that the Proponent has made no effort to address the mitigation hierarchy and that the direct and cumulative impacts on MNES outweigh the Proponent's economic benefit. EnvA considers refusal of the Project to be the only appropriate outcome.

¹ [DCCEW \(2022\) Decision Notice– Lake Vermont Meadowbrook Coal Mine Project](#)

² [DCCEW \(2021\) Criteria for determining ESD relevance](#)

In support of this, the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (**IEEFA**) has concluded that Australia does not need to approve more coal mines to increase coal production, the pipeline of proposed coal mine approvals contrasts with global market outlooks and that approving new and expanding coal mines increases rehabilitation uncertainty and risks to taxpayers.³

Scientists have also questioned whether coal mine expansion benefits local communities in the long run and determined that coal mining is a less desirable option when the social and environmental costs are factored into the justification.⁴ This is reinforced by the many small Central Queensland coal companies falling into administration and larger companies placing mining operations into care and maintenance.⁵

Collectively, these matters demonstrate that the Project has not established a compelling public interest justification sufficient to outweigh the significant social and environmental impacts.

Threatened species and communities and migratory species

The Project will, or is likely to have, a significant impact on numerous threatened species and communities listed under the EPBC Act.

The terrestrial ecology assessment⁶ was based on a desktop assessment to determine the likely EPBC Act listed species and communities that could occur within the Project area, combined with on ground surveys in September 2025.

It is EnvA's view that surveys conducted over two weeks, at the end of the dry season, is insufficient to appropriately identify threatened plant or animal species that may be impacted. While the Proponent claims that the surveys were conducted in accordance with guidelines, the consultant has relied on outdated guidelines which cannot be relied upon for accurate impact assessment.

Despite the inadequate surveys, the Proponent has identified numerous threatened species, communities and migratory species within the study area and/or within the project footprint area that may be impacted by the Project including, but not limited to:

Threatened ecological communities

- Brigalow (*Acacia harpophylla* dominant and co-dominant)
- Poplar Box Grassy Woodland on Alluvial Plains
- Natural Grasslands of the Queensland Central Highlands and northern Fitzroy Basin

Threatened species

- Squatter pigeon (*Geophaps scripta scripta*: vulnerable)
- Koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*: endangered)
- Greater glider (*Petauroides volans*: endangered)
- Ornamental snake (*Denisonia maculata*: vulnerable)
- *Aristida annua* (vulnerable)
- King Bluegrass (*Dichanthium queenslandicum*: endangered)
- Bluegrass (*Dichanthium setosum*: vulnerable)

³ [IEEFA \(11 February 2025\) Australia's coal production limits far exceed actual output, so why approve new mine developments?](#)

⁴ [De Valck, J et al. \(2021\) Does coal mining benefit local communities in the long run? A sustainability perspective on regional Queensland, Australia. Science Direct](#)

⁵ [EnvA \(2026\) Central Queensland coal company Vitrinite enters administration as sector instability deepens](#)

⁶ [Aarc \(December 2025\) Attachment 4- Summary of Terrestrial Ecological MNES values following preliminary ecology surveys](#)

Migratory species

- Fork-tailed swift (*Apus pacificus*)
- Oriental cuckoo (*Cuculus optatus*)
- White-throated needletail (*Hirundapus caudacutus*; endangered)

The Proponent acknowledges that further seasonal survey work is required to adequately address the likelihood of impacts on threatened species and communities, and migratory species. There is further acknowledgement that the Project is likely to impact on threatened species and communities and the Proponent considers that the impacts will be a controlled action.

EnvA further notes that the list of species and communities that may be impacted are regularly identified in coal mine applications in the Bowen Basin. The Project cannot be considered in isolation. The Bowen Basin has experienced decades of incremental habitat clearing, groundwater extraction and river modification through successive coal mine approvals. Each individual project has contributed to cumulative impacts that now threaten ecological function across the region. Approval of another 1,615 ha disturbance footprint would further erode the resilience of already fragmented ecosystems.

There is also a need to consider the Proponent's other proposed extension – the Lake Vermont Meadowbrook Project – which will also clear or disturb large areas of these same threatened species and communities. The total impact of the cumulative impacts from the proposed extensions must be considered, along with the proposed extensions from neighbouring mines such as Saraji East, Olive Downs and Winchester South.

These cumulative impacts include progressive habitat loss, fragmentation, altered hydrology, groundwater drawdown, increased edge effects, invasive species, changing fire regimes and climate-related stressors.

EnvA is of the strongest view that this Project must be refused on the basis of the unacceptable impacts to threatened species and communities from:

- the direct impacts due to the loss of habitat,
- the cumulative impacts of the continuing approval of new and expanding coal mines in the Bowen Basin in Central Queensland, and
- the increasing impacts of extreme weather events on these species and communities.

If the project cannot be refused until further assessments of the impacts on threatened species and communities, and migratory species is completed, we strongly recommend that Listed threatened species and communities (ss 18 and 18A), and Listed migratory species (ss 20 and 20A) are included controlling provisions.

Offsets

The Terrestrial Ecology report notes that an offset strategy will be prepared for the Project, with limited detail provided other than it is proposed to be on land owned by the Proponent adjacent to the Project.

EnvA further notes that the proposed offsets for the Lake Vermont Meadowbrook have not been formalised with additional offsets to be negotiated at Stage 4 of the project scheduled for 2045. With no mapping provided of the proposed offsets, it is unclear if this Project will impact on the proposed Lake Vermont Meadowbrook offset area, or how suitable offsets can be incorporated on land adjacent to the Project which is in line with the current EPBC Offsets Policy or the draft *National Environmental Standard (Environmental Offsets) 2026* (if it is finalised prior to the preparation of the EIS).

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.

Since the Queensland Environmental Offsets Policy was introduced in 2014, biodiversity indicators— including vegetation extent and condition, and populations of threatened species— have continued to decline across the state.⁷ Further to this, there is a lack of suitable land for offsetting the impacts of development⁸, particularly in the Brigalow Belt bioregion which has been, and continues to be, extensively cleared for agriculture and coal mines.

It is essential that the avoidance of impact—not offsetting—remains the priority, and that suitable offsets are identified and secured prior to the approval of any project that will impact on MNES.

Rehabilitation

A rehabilitation plan has not yet been developed, although it is noted that the proposal is to return the area to a grazing post-mining land use and will not include any residual voids post closure. The Proponent states that the “disturbance associated with the Project would be of a relatively small scale.”

EnvA considers that 1,615ha of disturbance is not of a small scale, particularly in a region that has already been highly disturbed and fragmented. 78.7% of vegetation cover in the Isaac-Comet Downs subregion has already been cleared in this Brigalow Belt subregion⁹, which means that every additional hectare of habitat clearing and disturbance is highly likely to impact on threatened species and ecosystems.

Water Resources

The Project is within the Isaac-Connors sub-catchment of the greater Fitzroy Basin – the largest Great Barrier Reef catchment.

The Isaac River is the main watercourse in the vicinity of the Project area, with a catchment of approximately 4,100 km². The Isaac River flows into the Connors River and then the Mackenzie River approximately 150 km downstream of the Project. Ultimately, the Mackenzie River joins the Fitzroy River, which discharges into the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park near Port Alma.

All waterways and drainage lines in the vicinity of the Project area are ephemeral and experience flow only after sustained or intense rainfall in the catchment. Lumpy Gully is the only named tributary in the Project area. Stream flows are highly variable, with channels drying out during winter to early spring when rainfall and runoff is historically low, although some pools hold water for extended periods. Consequently, stream physical attributes, water quality and the composition of aquatic flora and fauna communities tend to be highly variable.

Surface water

There has been no assessment of potential impacts on surface water resources completed at this stage, although the Proponent notes that the potential impacts and mitigation actions including:

- Flooding – the Project would extend onto the Isaac River floodplain. Levees would be constructed to protect the operations from flooding and would have the potential to cause increases in adjacent flood levels and velocities.
- Geomorphology – existing minor waterways would be diverted around the proposed flood protection works to minimise the potential for clean runoff to interact with the mine operations. Care would be needed to ensure the modified channels would be self-sustaining and do not impact the neighbouring waterways.

⁷ [Queensland Government \(2024\). State of the Environment Report](#)

⁸ [Queensland Government. In-demand offsets](#)

⁹ [Accad, A. Kelley, J.A.R., Richter, D., Li, J., Neldner, V.J. and Ryan T.S. \(2023\). Remnant Regional Ecosystem Vegetation](#)

- Surface water quality – the disturbance associated with the Project would have the potential to impact on the quality of surface water runoff. A surface water management system would be developed to contain mine-affected water, control erosion and management sediment loads.

This level of information presents no useful information to assess the potential significant impacts to surface water.

Groundwater

Again, there is no detailed information or modelling of the potential impacts to groundwater, however the Proponent notes that preliminary assessments indicate that there is a lack of shallow groundwater and the predicted drawdown extent is localised. However, the Proponent also acknowledges that the Project is likely to have a significant impact on groundwater resources due to potential impacts on groundwater quality during and post mining activities.

The referral acknowledges that the investigations required to understand groundwater and surface water interactions have not yet been completed. Without that information, neither the Minister nor the public can properly assess the significance of impacts or the effectiveness of proposed mitigation.

EnvA considers that there is likely to be a significant impact on water resources which have not been adequately addressed in the current Project referral. Likewise, the Proponent considers that the Project will be a controlled action in relation to water resources (EPBC Act ss 24D and 24E).

Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions

There is limited information provided in the referral but only a response to an information request on GHG emissions.¹⁰ The response does not detail the methods used to calculate emissions but provides a total 'early' emissions estimate of 71.85 Mt CO₂-e over the life of the project. The emission estimates provided in the response to the information request are provided as:

- Scope 1 emissions - 1,979,458 t CO₂-e,
- Scope 2 emissions – 134,794 t CO₂-e, and
- Scope 3 emissions – 69,740,000 t CO₂-e.

This estimated fugitive methane emissions included in the Scope 1 emissions appears to have been calculated using the Method 1 state based emissions factor for estimating fugitive emission from open cut mines in Queensland, which is 0.031. Multiplying the proposed ROM coal production of 31 Mt by the Method 1 emissions factor of 0.031 produces an estimated 961,000 t CO₂-e, which is close to the proponent's fugitive emissions estimate of 952,171 t CO₂-e.

From 1 July 2026, open-cut coal mines are required to estimate fugitive methane emissions using Method 2 or Method 3 under the National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting framework.¹¹ Coal mine operators are now required to use Method 2 or 3 and cannot use the outdated and highly inaccurate state based emissions factors in Method 1. Fugitive emissions from open cut coal mines in Queensland are likely to be more than double the estimated emissions using this methodology.¹²

There is insufficient information required to assess if the project can meet the requirements of the Safeguard Mechanism and the proposed mitigation. EnvA submits that the Minister cannot

¹⁰ [GHG emissions - response to DCCEEW information request](#)

¹¹ [Australian Government \(July 2026\) NGER legislation amendments for the 2026–27 reporting year](#)

¹² [EMBER \(2023\) Method 1 underestimates methane pollution from Queensland open cut coal mines](#)

reasonably approve this Project without being satisfied that it is compatible with the Safeguard Mechanism and Australia's legislated emissions reduction targets. If the Project cannot demonstrate compatibility with the Safeguard Mechanism, it will undermine Australia meeting commitments such as the Paris Agreement¹³, legislated emission reduction targets¹⁴ and interim targets¹⁵, Belem Declaration on the Transition away from fossil fuels¹⁶, and the Global Methane Pledge.¹⁷

The additional GHG emissions will contribute to increased global temperatures and result in adverse impacts to numerous MNES. 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. As global warming increases to 1.5°C and above, these impacts will increase in severity.

EnvA considers that this is a clearly unacceptable Project at a time when the world is increasingly transitioning away from fossil fuels. There are sufficient coal resources already approved to supply the domestic and international demand. Approving another coal mine extension to operate for a further 15 years is irresponsible and contrary to meeting legislated emission reduction targets and the legally binding international treaty on climate change.

Conclusion

The referral documentation presents a proposal that would clear over a thousand hectares of habitat, generate substantial greenhouse gas emissions, create significant uncertainty regarding impacts to water resources, and adversely affect multiple Matters of National Environmental Significance. The information provided is insufficient to demonstrate that these impacts can be avoided, mitigated or offset. We are also mindful that the Lake Vermont Meadowbrook project is also currently proposed which significantly increases the impacts of the proposed extension to the Lake Vermont Coal Mine.

The referral fails to demonstrate that the proposed action can avoid unacceptable impacts on Matters of National Environmental Significance or that those impacts can be adequately mitigated. The Project should therefore be refused. If the Minister is not considering refusing the Project, it should be determined to be a controlled action requiring assessment by Environmental Impact Statement, including comprehensive public consultation and independent scientific review.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make comments on the referral of the Lake Vermont Mockingbird Project.

Yours sincerely,



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Director

Environmental Advocacy in Central Queensland

¹³ [The Paris Agreement](#)

¹⁴ [Climate Change Act 2022](#)

¹⁵ [Australian Government \(2025\) Setting our 2035 target and path to net zero](#)

¹⁶ [Australia joins Belém Declaration to transition from fossil fuels](#)

¹⁷ [Global Methane Pledge](#)