

Submission Cover Sheet

Fingerboards Mineral Sands Project Inquiry and Advisory
Committee - EES

135

Request to be heard?: No - but please email me a copy of the
Timetable and any Directions

Full Name: Timothy McKenna

Organisation:

Affected property:

Attachment 1: Mine_submission.

Attachment 2:

Attachment 3:

Comments: See attached submission

Friday 23rd October, 2020

Attention: Inquiry and Planning Committee

Dear Minister Wynne,

My name is Tim McKenna. I am a third generation dairy farmer and together with my wife Kate, I produce milk on the hills of Glenaladale. Our farm is three kilometres north of the fingerboards where Kalbar intends to build their mine.



We love where we live and I can still remember the first time my wife told me she never wanted to leave Glenaladale. Such is the attraction of the place, my wife, who grew up knowing only town life, fell in love with her new surroundings and after a short time, told me she didn't ever want to leave. The beauty of the landscape in Glenaladale rarely goes unnoticed. When people come to our house for the first time, and step out of the car, I can mouth the words before they do, "nice spot you've got here", and I couldn't agree more. I've lived here all my life and I'm still stopped in my daily activity by the drama of the landscape. The sun setting behind grassy hilltops with cattle grazing the slopes, the spray irrigation water from the Mitchell, as you drive down onto the flats, catching the sun as it drifts down onto a gigantic patchwork of crops. Glenaladale is the only home I've ever known, and while it's an easy place to romanticise, it's

also a place of abundant opportunity. It uniquely marries highly productive farming enterprises with a stunning landscape, and the result is a truly special place to live. "It's God's own country", as one lifetime local says. And we think he's right.

About seven years ago we started to hear the name Kalbar Resources. There were rumours of a large scale open cut mine at the fingerboard but we didn't take it seriously. The fantasy of overblown egos we thought. Something like that so close to the Mitchell river and the vegetable production it supports was not possible. We were reassured by the fact that four years earlier in 2009, two Rio Tinto Geologists told us a mine here would never get approval. They came up to the house after looking at the cutting on our road frontage. I remember them saying, "there's mineral sands down there but we'd never get it through because of the location". It wasn't a long conversation but I took it to mean, it was an unviable recourse due to its proximity to the Mitchell river and the flats

In 2013, when Kalbar Resources acquired the exploration licence over the fingerboards from Rio Tinto they immediately deemed the site to be non sensitive and home to just a few sheep farms. This was our first taste of how Kalbar would operate. It was the start of their, do whatever it takes, say whatever it we need to campaign, to develop a large-scale mining project right next to the Mitchell River. The Mitchell river has long been recognised for its conservation value and had been the subject of controversy years earlier when the Cain - Kirner government declared a national park upstream to stop it ever being dammed, an act of conservation they no doubt thought would last. Kalbar have one upped the Angusvale dam project though with a plan that would have far greater environmental impacts, without the benefits. With government approval, a company such as Kalbar, with no track record or experience running a mine, could get

permission to dig up our farm and all the farms around us. They could dam gullies, flatten hills, doze old growth trees and build a massive tailings dam high above the Mitchell.

Seven years later we now regard the Name Kalbar very differently. We no longer dismiss their threat to destroy, no longer do we doubt they will take the farms and businesses that have been built up over generations. Seven years later we now know we are in the fight of our lives to save what's ours.

My father grew up in the depression and always dreamt of owning a viable farm. He was a returned soldier from the Second World War and while he never spoke about the war, he loved talking about farming. My Mother was born just after the depression and she trapped rabbits before school to supplement household income. They both had a strong work ethic, good fiscal discipline and learnt from necessity to seize an opportunity when it presented. They were typical of their generation. When Mum and Dad married in 1956 they became an unassuming, but formidable farming team.

It takes a lot of time, effort and commitment to develop a farm, decades of efforts and commitment usually. Your heart really has to be in it to stick it out. My parents cleared much of the land, forgoing many little luxuries including holidays and home renovation. My mother washed clothes for seven kids in a weatherboard shed 15 metres from the house.

They did whatever was required to make the farm work. One of Dad's most well worn phrases was "We'll get it when the bush is cleared", and as Mum recalls, these words were



applied as often, and for as long as was needed for the property to be cleared. My earliest memories are of following Mum around day after day, for weeks on end, while she picked up sticks and Manuka roots and heaped them on enormous piles of scrub ready to be burned. This happened one section at a time across the whole farm for twenty years, until the cleaning up, the fencing, and water points were all completed. It's the sort of commitment you have to live to understand. This is how farmers become so deeply connected to the land.

Today, my wife and I are running the farm my parents work so hard on. It comprises 340 hectares across five titles, including the original block purchased by my grandparents in 1932. The pride I feel as a result of this continued property ownership, and our family's lasting commitment to farming in Glenaladale is immense.

The sacrifices that have been made and the legacy that my family has built, is now under threat like never before. No drought or flooding rain this time, Kalbar's open cut mine is much more at home in a nightmare than in a Dorothea Mackellar poem. A mine that will destroy our farm and farming life is not a challenge we can meet fairly. If Kalbar's mine goes ahead, the opportunity for my children to farm this land will be taken away. Our family farm has overcome so much over so many years. It would be hard to see it all brought to an end because of laws that are past their use by date that say miners can do whatever they want on a farmer's land.

Our dealings with Kalbar have left us with grave fears about how they would operate a mine. Concerns about dust have been dismissed, as have concerns about noise. The community has no answer on how the additional water extraction from the Mitchell river is going to be managed and how it will be sustainable into the future. Our neighbors at the opposite end of what would be the initial mine void have been told to vacate their home for five years because heavy vehicle

noise will make it uninhabitable. It's these private discussions that Kalbar is having within the community that are so frightening, because they tell us what is really going to happen- minus the spin. Anything unpleasant about this mine has simply been omitted from Kalbar's presentations.

A sand mine sounds pretty harmless, and this is the angle Kalbar has been pushing. Nothing to worry about here they tell us. In truth, this isn't the case at all. We know that what's buried safely under Glenaladale isn't the same sand that lines our beaches or what our kids play in at school. Heavy mineral sands are a bit like asbestos- perfectly safe unless disturbed. Nor is heavy mineral sands mined in the same way construction sand is. Heavy mineral sands mining involves very large, very deep voids and significant levels of permanent damage to the landscape and its future farming value. The Lindenow flats, where thousands of tonnes of vegetables are produced each year are just three kilometres away downwind of the proposed mine site. It's not possible to suppress the dust cloud that these voids would produce across the warm and windy months. Any high fire danger day would become a high dust danger day for the flats as well.

To be told our farmland will be rehabilitated when we know it will never be the same is very irritating. Top soil can't be put back like it was, it's not that simple. Soil profiles take millenia to develop and once disturbed down to the forty metre depths of an open cut mine, that process is undone. It's easy to push a tree over with a large machine but try àstanding it back up. It's



much the same with the soil profile. Thousands of years of weathering and decomposition, all of the layers in perfect sequence, all the biology intact and Kalbar tells us they'll put it back from the seat of a dozer. We're not even allowing ourselves to get that far ahead though. The history of mineral sands mine rehabilitation in Victoria is dreadful. The likelihood of Kalbar following suit at the fingerboards is high, there is simply no money in that side of things. These companies take what is valuable out of the ground, and then, like the surrounding property values, they disappear.

Kalbar intends to process sand using vast quantities of water and toxic chemicals which once in combination result in a large volume of toxic sludge. Kalbar's sludge will be stored on sight in a massive tailings dam in an elevated position less than three kilometres from the Mitchell river. This aspect of Kalbar's mine alone must raise alarm bells for the Catchment Management Authority and the EPA, even before dust and noise are considered.

The proposed sight is simply not suitable for a mine such as this. East Gippsland is prone to east coast lows that deliver heavy rain for up to a week at a time. In 1998 there was 300 mm of rainfall in seven days at the fingerboards. Then in 1990 we had a similar rain event and a massive flood on the Mitchell river. In 2007 an East coast low brought days of rain and another large flood to the area. These events are not as rare as Kalbar suggests. Water is all important to farmland, but our weather patterns are unpredictable and the force of water in flood deserves the utmost respect. The significance of toxic sludge sitting above the Mitchell river in large volumes in an area prone to east coast lows needs to be considered carefully. This sludge poses an unacceptable risk to the whole river system. Were there to be a breach of the dam wall or overflow due to a rain event, the impact would be far reaching. A spill from a tailings

dam would have serious consequences and a failure of the dam wall would be catastrophic for anyone and anything that relies on water from the Mitchell river or Gippsland lakes.

On top of the risk of contamination, there is the question of where the water for processing will come from. Kalbar has thrown around a few half-hearted alternatives, some “whatever it takes” ideas, but we all know that the three plus gigalitres of water this mine would use annually will ultimately have to come from the Mitchell river system.

For answers to questions such as these have been told to wait for the EES. When the EES is delivered all will be clear, they said. We have waited and waited, and while we have waited Kalbar have been busy drilling test holes and raising capital. We have been told not to worry about dust, it will be controlled, noise will be suppressed, water will be found, the 40 metre deep mine voids will be rehabilitated and all will be well. This is not very reassuring from an operator who can't accurately collect rainfall data or record wind speeds. A rain gauge is very simple technology to master yet there are substantial gaps in their records for the study period. This makes us wonder if any of their data extrapolations for any of the project outcomes are worth the paper they're written on. The top wind speed that was measured for the period was 40 kmph. That was during a time on our farm when large green tree branches were blown from trees, gravel laneways were scoured of fine particles by strong winds and we had at least one gale force wind that made me get up in the night to check on buildings. Dust from these enormous voids would blow onto crops and pastures rendering them unsalable and unpalatable. Vegetable produce with dust contamination is discarded. It's not as simple as just rinsing the dust off. Broccoli, cauliflower and lettuce suck dust up like a sponge and it's impossible to remove. Large quantities of these vegetables are grown directly downwind of the fingerboards, some in paddocks less than two kilometres from where the initial mine voids would be.

Kalbar, we have come to realise, are the masters of the convoluted answer. Whenever concerns have been raised that herald from the realm of common sense, they are brushed aside. They give answers based on what technically could happen, what has happened elsewhere, but under different conditions, and how modern mining protocols mean dust is never airborne, noise doesn't travel and chemicals don't pollute waterways. Gaining a community's trust is the first step in a project like this. After six years of watching Kalbar operate in our community we have come to the conclusion that they are sneaky. They portray themselves as good corporate citizens while behind the scenes they harass, intimidate and bully landowners for access to their properties. The billboard ad on the Princess Highway at Stratford is an example of just how sneaky they are prepared to be. Bizarrely, it shows wind turbines operating in a paddock. We can only assume this is an attempt to attach themselves to a clean green image and a completely different industry. If Kalbar can't be truthful about what they actually intend to do at the Fingerboards, we should be very worried. How can they be trusted to follow through on promised rehabilitation or any other compliance promises for that matter. We trust their management team only to line their own pockets with a "career making mine" no matter what the environmental cost. We don't trust them and we don't appreciate being lied to about the impacts of this mine.

Kalbar is making a big show of being socially responsible. They put ads in local papers and sponsor local sporting clubs when they should be facing some really hard questions. Questions from the people whose lives they will ruin and whose businesses will be destroyed. They choose instead, the easy option of throwing a few bucks at kids sporting teams to try and get the parents onside. Kalbar assures us they won't cause another environmental catastrophe

with a misplaced mine. It's a shame we haven't seen some small acts of integrity from them to give us confidence.

Glenaladale can't afford this mine nor can Lindenow, Bairnsdale or Australia.

We know Our continent's arable land mass is nothing like that of Europe or America. We aren't the lucky country in that regard. We don't have deep topsoil and water together in many locations. The "Mitchell river flats" is a phrase I've heard thousands of times, but as familiar as they are to us, they should never be taken for granted.

We live in a drying climate. Our local land and water resources are already under threat. They are as precious as they are fragile and they must be protected. I've heard plenty of stories from senior farmers of how the region once enjoyed more rain. I have twenty five years of farming experience myself that supports this. There isn't enough water flowing down the Mitchell river to meet existing demands let alone the massive processing requirements of a mineral sands mine. The water in the Mitchell and what it affords us is vitally important. It's easy to forget that food just doesn't appear on supermarket



shelves. Growers are already short of water, already building off stream storages, already facing earlier and increasingly frequent restrictions. Four large private irrigation storages have been built by Mitchell river irrigators in the last few years. These have been built at considerable cost,

in response to tightening supply, and are a window into what vegetable growers see for the future of the river.

The water that flows down the Mitchell is life giving. It grows food for direct human consumption and the importance of this should never be forgotten. One of the most compelling statements we've heard, illuminating the absurdity of this mine, was delivered at a community meeting by a lady who grew up in Ireland. She referred to the potato famine of 1845, and how it changed the country's priorities and that there was a generation of Irish who never forgot how it felt to face starvation. If water for growing food is transferred to mining, the potential gains in food production that would naturally occur are wiped out. How stupid could we be? she asked, to put a few quick bucks ahead of food security. If Kalbar's mine takes more than three gigalitres from the Mitchell annually, food production on the Lindenow flats will not grow to meet the ever increasing demand, nor will the potential of the flats be realised. Anything that threatens access to water, threatens food supply. Kalbars mine is a threat to water supply but also the whole river and lakes system. Talking water, winter fill or not, means it's gone out of the system. The river and lakes are what they are because water flows. A stream of additional truck traffic on our roads will be a poor substitute for a thriving river system and all that it supports.

It's not just individual farms and residents that will be impacted though.

The proposed mine would have a devastating effect on our whole community both financially and socially.

The \$450 million dollar vegetable industry is the most obvious immediate casualty. The 200 jobs that have been projected to come from this mine could be wiped out from the horticultural sector alone as well as the income from surrounding beef, dairy and sheep farms. This income that

flows into our local businesses every week now is gone if this mine goes ahead. We can't reinflate the farms and other businesses that take decades to assemble, just because the mine didn't work out.

If a company as large and well resourced as Rio Tinto was sceptical about the logistics of a mine in this location there is a good chance there was some sound reasoning behind that. The fickle nature of mining is demonstrated by the wild price swings that publicly listed mining companies endure. Processing adds a significant layer of complexity to this, and all the many variables involved in mining, make this project a huge risk for an inexperienced miner. Were Kalbar's mine to become unviable at some point, the potential for Glenaladale to be left with a huge permanent mess is significant.

The first stage of Kalbar's project would be less than a kilometre from our house and 500 meters from our boundary. As a third generation farmer working the same piece of land my

grandparents worked nearly ninety years ago, the prospect of an open cut mine in such a beautiful environment is very distressing.

Farming is not for the faint hearted and farmers aren't the sorts to shy away from a fight. Since the arrival of Kalbar though, we have been fighting an uphill battle. We've been unable to move our own farming enterprise forward with any level of certainty. We have been unable to plan, or spend the money on the all important



capital items that keep the wheels of any enterprise turning. That's money that hasn't been going back into local businesses, and I know other farmers have been similarly affected. We've had our share of setbacks over the years. The many tales of struggle we've known on our farm are currency around our kitchen table equal to that of the best Australian bush poetry. The calculated risks that have played a large part in the success on many farms we have witnessed on ours as well. My parents invested in water conservation with enthusiasm bordering on obsession, allowing us to irrigate crops and keep stock during drought. As farmers, we are encouraged by governments to navigate challenges using knowledge, skills and ingenuity. We are asked to save water, asked to manage cash flow fluctuations, we are encouraged to be smart in the face of diminishing margins. We scheme and scrape and save, and we survive, and often thrive. In a country that rode so far on the sheep's back, in a place that always looked after and celebrated its farmers, I now feel as though we have been let down. We've kept up our end of the bargain but we're being sold down the river by a flawed system. A lack of legislative change continues to see antiquated laws favouring mining over modern, sustainable, agricultural businesses. While farming we have strived and planned and managed and kept our dream alive. If Kalbar's mine goes ahead, our business will be one of the first in a long line of casualties, and our dream will be over.

Regards

Tim McKenna.