

Submission Cover Sheet

Fingerboards Mineral Sands Project Inquiry and Advisory
Committee - EES

541

Request to be heard?: Yes

Full Name: Heather Watson

Organisation:

Affected property:

Attachment 1: Submission.docx

Attachment 2:

Attachment 3:

Comments: See attached submission

Dear Inquiry and Advisory Committee members,

Re: Submission in response to the EES for the Fingerboards mineral sands project.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the ESS for the Fingerboards Mineral Sands Project.

I live with my family on a farm directly downwind from the proposed mine site. I moved to the area from Melbourne 12 years ago, drawn by the natural beauty, clean air and abundance of bush – an idyllic place to raise a family and a huge drawcard after years working as an engineer in industrial processing and manufacturing plants.

I strongly object to the proposed project for many reasons, including:

- Over-estimation of jobs and disruption to the labour market in the area
- Dust, rehabilitation, and destruction of natural systems
- Under-estimation of impact on habitat and water

I support more jobs in the community. It would be great to have more industries that provide satisfying careers to enable our youth to have purposeful employment and to remain in the area. This project does not provide this. Mining awards pay very well to compensate for the health risks and soul-numbing tedium of the work. There is no way that the shareholders will allow the proposed numbers of employees to eventuate. I believe that the numbers are over-stated to win public support and that shareholders have already been sold a completely different proposition or promised labour cuts through efficiency and automation. This is standard practice in corporations.

The 'secure' jobs and high wages will lure away our region's best operators - people who currently run small businesses, employing locals, providing interesting work and apprenticeships, and servicing our local businesses. We need projects that support our community rather than ones that decimate it. The attractiveness of mining jobs will allow Kalbar to pick and choose – our young unskilled people do stand a chance against either our best operators or people coming in from outside the area.

The project could offer opportunities if it were to incorporate the downstream refining perhaps even forming the basis of a hi tech industry in Australia but Kalbar are not able to justify the cost of making the refining process safe and acceptable. Instead, the clever jobs go to China where the environmental controls can be watered down. The jobs that we are left with add nothing to our community – just increased cost of running the rest of the businesses in the area.

On a personal level, I am very concerned about the impact of dust on our drinking water. The dust will blow – dust suppression using water is only effective in mild weather. We know from our experience farming alongside a coal mine and also from the plumes of dust that form out of local quarries that dust will be a problem whenever we have high winds - which is extremely often in East Gippsland. The EPA does nothing to prevent these dust events now. How can they? There is no effective suppression strategy other than keeping a layer of vegetation in place.

There seems to be contradictory evidence about the potential for toxic chemicals in the dust and little information about the quantity and content of dust particles that are too large to cause lung disease. What do we do when our drinking water becomes tainted? How do we know if its safe to drink? While drinking water for those on tank water is my biggest concern in this area, there is also a risk of contaminated surfaces in homes and workplaces, eye injuries to people and animals and contamination of grazing land, bushland, rivers and plants grown for human consumption. This has not been adequately addressed in the EES.

Dust events will be exacerbated by ineffective rehabilitation. The soils in the project area are very fragile and it will be difficult and expensive to preserve the topsoil and will take years for soil structure and soil life to recover once it has been repositioned. During that time, the ground cover will be poor and leaving the area vulnerable to invasive weeds such as African Lovegrass which are extremely difficult to control. Rehabilitation is never perfect as the natural systems that are disturbed are only superficially understood. Rehabilitation is an extremely expensive activity with no benefit to the shareholders and so, at best, will be a box ticking exercise done in the most cost effective way, more likely given the reputation of the mining industry and the foreign ownership of the project, delayed and left for the local community and ratepayers to deal with.

What we need from this project is an enforced commitment to annual rehabilitation quotas starting in year one that are assessed using a range of effectiveness measures by independent agronomists/natural resource managers. If this project goes ahead, let's make it a model for how rehabilitation should be done.

I am concerned that the value of the natural environment has been underestimated. The surveys were conducted during a terrible drought. We have seen trees that have survived repeated droughts succumb this time around. Animal and plant populations at the time of the survey could not be representative and the surveys (including dust monitoring) should be repeated now that the drought is over and adjusted to allow for future recovery.

After this year's bushfires so much of the bush, habitat and wildlife in our country has been destroyed. The value that we put on native vegetation has to be recalculated – it is a much scarcer resource and so important as a refuge and breeding ground from which to repopulate the burnt areas. Now is not the time for discretionary clearing of native vegetation.

I am concerned that the agricultural loss has also been undervalued. Water is such a scarce resource and should be reserved for the greatest good – food production or preserving our aquatic environments from salinity and algal blooms. How can we sanction low-tech water intensive industries that waste this precious resource? At the very least, the productivity of the land in the project area should be valued based on its potential as a large-scale irrigated farm.

And finally, I need to express my feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and disappointment in this process. I can only imagine how soul-destroying this is for the people who are directly affected. The law is antiquated and heavily biased in favour of mining over the needs of communities and the environment. The track record of communities stopping inappropriate mining developments is dismal. The EES is overwhelming in size and content – far too much for individual community members to digest and analyse and well beyond our resources to test or refute comprehensively. Many people will not have made a submission because it appears to be too difficult and ultimately is futile. Other submissions, like mine I assume, will be ignored because they are not specific enough or otherwise invalid. But I do appreciate the opportunity to make these points.

Yours sincerely,

Heather Watson