

## SUBMISSION TO THE FINGERBOARDS MINERAL SANDS PROJECT INQUIRY AND ADVISORY COMMITTEE

*This submission is supplementary to my initial Submission listed as Submission 40.*

My interest in the Human Health Risk Assessment component of the EES relates to my work as a rural general practitioner in Lakes Entrance and Bairnsdale for the past 38 years. I also have had 18 years academic experience as Director of the Monash University Rural Clinical School in Bairnsdale from 2000 until 2018. In that role I developed expertise and experience in both qualitative and quantitative research, with a focus on rural medical workforce and education for rural medical practice.

In my current role as national Censor in Chief with the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine, I have responsibility for standards of educational programs delivered by the College as well as ensuring Fellows and Trainees have attained and retain required qualifications and continue to deliver appropriate levels of care to rural communities. This is underpinned by a commitment to the overall health and well-being of Australia's rural populations.

**The Minister's requirement that the Human Health Risk Assessment include assessment of the "likely effects to the social cohesion, health and well-being of the communities in the vicinity of the project" has not been adequately addressed by the proponent in their EES Report.**

In Chapter 9 of the EES under "Summary of residual impacts on health, public safety and wellbeing values", the proponent states that "Residents within 10 kms of the project area are not expected to experience elevated stress levels as a result of the project".

Further, under the heading "Amenity, wellbeing and rural lifestyle", the proponent states again that "residents living within 10 km of the project area are not expected to experience changes in amenity".

Under the heading "Cohesive community", the proponent states that "the project is not expected to reduce community cohesion, as the majority of the construction and operation workforce will be sourced from the Gippsland region."

This statement requires careful examination. Firstly there is the questionable assumption that the only thing needed for community cohesion is jobs. Secondly, it is clear that the proponent is not focused on the impact on *East Gippsland*, given the stated intention to source workforce from the wider Gippsland region. But more importantly, the proponent's EES ignores the impact they have already had on community cohesion, that is likely to be far greater should the mine go ahead. This is the focus of this study.

### RESEARCH

Since my initial Submission to the IAC, I have conducted qualitative research into the impact of the proposed Mineral Sands Project on the receptor population.

My research question was: *"What has been the impact of the proponent's proposal on individuals and families living in or adjacent to the mine's proposed footprint?"*

This has involved an in-depth semi-structured interview of community members resident within 10 kms of the proposed mine footprint, the majority within 5 kms.

I interviewed nine (9) community members in total. Potential participants were identified by word of mouth and then randomly selected to be invited to be included. These individuals agreed to take

part in this research on the understanding that they would remain anonymous, for obvious privacy reasons.

I have no professional, financial or personal relationship with any of the participants in the study. None of them is a patient of my medical practice.

## RESULTS

I have collated my findings into several themes.

- Psychological disturbance

I have observed anger, resentment, anxiety, hypervigilance, depressed mood, helplessness, grief, despair and loss of trust to varying degrees in the interviewees. They made statements such as:

“We don’t sleep”;

“our emotions are all over the place”;

“we are mostly really angry or really depressed”;

“I can’t concentrate and I have lost the drive to go to work each day”.

These were common statements amongst this group. I heard about a suicide attempt by a local resident who was only saved when a neighbour intervened.

- Inability to plan for the future

This was an almost universal theme amongst the interviewees.

“Our lives and our business are on hold”;

“we are in limbo”;

“we don’t know what to do”;

“other neighbours have been harassed and bullied and finally sold and moved out of the area”;

“this has been hanging over our heads for seven years like the sword of Damocles”.

None of the interviewees had reached the stage of being clear about what they would do if the project goes ahead. This included decisions about their properties, sale of machinery and livestock and whether they would remain in the region. It was clear that this uncertainty was a major contributor to their psychological state.

- Tension and division within families

All of the interviewees touched on the impact of this project on their family relationships. In some cases this was specifically about their relationship with their immediate partner, but many also talked about tension across generations and amongst second-degree relatives who have also lived in the area for their entire lives.

“He has been angry and stressed for seven years. There are continual arguments in this house on a daily basis”;

“this has dominated my life and my family and social activities”;

“I’m having nightmares that wake me in the middle of the night, and that just adds more stress to our relationship”.

- Tension and division amongst the local community

This is perhaps the most revealing illustration of the immediate and potential impact of this proposal on the “sensitive receptor” population and the wider community.

Several interviewees commented on the impact of the proposal on their long-term involvement with local sporting and volunteer organisations such as cricket and football clubs, CFA, SES etc.

“I avoid these meetings now”;

“I’ve lost lifetime friends who I have worked with for years to build up this club”.

“Their donations to sporting clubs and other organisations have just split the community -- these are just bribes – they are trying to buy their social licence”;

“this has split the community”;

“this has caused massive friction between those that see financial gain if they sell and those that want to preserve the environment and the local agricultural industries”;

“one of our neighbours couldn’t handle the harassment. They eventually wore him down and he sold his property”.

On the other hand, one interviewee said that the proposal had “galvanized” the community and “we are committed to work together to save our farms and our country”.

- Destruction of lives and livelihoods

In many of those interviewed, I observed various stages of grief in response to the loss of farming businesses that had involved a lifetime of investment, often on property handed down in families over several generations. They spoke of their connection to the land and the history of pasture management, tree-planting, stock and water management and progressive development of new infrastructure and modern farming practices in a changing climate.

All interviewees were convinced that the long-term viability of their landholdings would be preserved if the threat of the impact of the mine was removed.

“You need to know that the majority of this community has no trust in this mob, and there will be no cooperation between local residents and the mining people. The locals will not cooperate to rehabilitate land that we have lost and where our livelihoods have been destroyed”;

“we feel a total loss of control of our lives”;

“we can’t develop the property because of the uncertainty”.

- Loss of financial security

I observed significant confusion amongst the interviewees about the value of their properties if they decided to “sell out”. Some were clear that they may have some possibility of appropriate recompense if their property was compulsorily acquired. Others who had been told that their properties fell outside the “compulsory acquisition” zone were convinced that no one would purchase their farm as a going concern, and they regarded their land as “worthless”.

“Our property will end up worthless”;

“our property is now worthless because of the proximity to the mine and also because we haven’t had time to look after the land because we’ve been fighting this for so long”;

“I’m in partnership with other family members, but the business has been put on hold -- we’re still trying to expand because we have debt to the bank, and we are working on succession -planning. But I can’t talk with my wife about it because she gets too upset”.

- Stress of negotiating with the proponent

Some of the interviewees reported attempts to discuss the proposal with the proponent several years ago, to inform the proponent about issues such as local topography, soil qualities, weather patterns, river levels, change in climate etc. They said that if the proponent “didn’t like what they were hearing, they just ignored us”.

“They don’t negotiate, they just bully”;

“they are irrational, sleazy, lying bastards”;

“they have a huge sense of entitlement”;

“we have insisted that all communications will be in writing, but their letters have been bullying and threatening”;

“we don’t trust them”;

“they have played politics, games and subterfuge from day one”;

“they are tricky and misleading and show no empathy”.

- Sense of disempowerment

Most of those interviewed expressed a feeling of disempowerment and resentment in the face of a well-funded proponent and an “uncaring” government.

At least two of the cohort felt so angry and desperate about this sense of disempowerment that they spoke of the possibility of civil disobedience, damage to property and physical confrontation if the proposal goes ahead.

“We have a total loss of control of what’s happening”;

“we are under seige”;

“we can’t make any sense of this – why has it been allowed to get this far?”;

“they talk in all their communications that this is a done deal”;

“we have had no support from bureaucrats who fail to acknowledge that their behaviour has been inappropriate”.

I observed a compounded level of stress due to this disempowerment leading to loss of control of their lives and livelihoods.

## DISCUSSION

It is clear from these interviews that the proposed mining project has already had a major negative impact on the social cohesion, health and wellbeing of the communities in the vicinity of the project. Contrary to the proponent’s position that “residents within 10 kms of the project area are not expected to experience elevated stress levels as a result of the project”, in some of these residents the stress experienced as a result of the activities of the proponent may have already brought about irreversible psychological harm.

There is significant literature on the coping mechanisms that people use in situations of stress. Earlier research defined coping in terms of personality styles or defence mechanisms derived from ego psychology.

More recent work (Lazarus and Folkman) has described “two major coping categories: (1) emotion-focused coping, which refers to the regulation of emotions that are generated by the appraisal process, such as anger or sadness in response to the appraisal of loss, anxiety, or fear in the case of appraisal of threat, and eagerness and excitement, mixed with some worry, in the case of the appraisal of challenge; and (2) problem-focused coping, which refers to the management of the problem itself.” **(1)**

In my interviews, I observed both forms of coping in response to the stress that this project has generated. Most of the interviewees fall into the category of emotion-focused coping as demonstrated by the range of emotions expressed.

This psychological response has arisen from a sustained and often intangible threat that remains unresolved. This stress, exacerbated by continued bullying and harassment, is not immediately life-threatening such as would be experienced in war, armed combat or a bushfire, but is an on-going threat to livelihood, family cohesion, personal hopes and dreams and long-term financial security.

A minority of those interviewed demonstrated problem-focused coping, by becoming immersed in the detail of the project, the EES documents and the governance and management structure of the proponent. This strategy was based on a need to be well-informed enough about the project to argue intelligently about the environmental and broader community impact of the proposal.

However all of these interviewees exhibited at least some degree of psychological and emotional disturbance when discussing the proposal, revealing a breakdown of these coping mechanisms described in the literature. A number of the participants actually broke down and cried during the interview.

As I pointed out in my initial Submission, this range of emotions is at least consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The American Psychiatric Association describes PTSD as a condition “characterized by exposure to a traumatic event and the subsequent development of symptoms that fall into four clusters (i.e., intrusions, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity)”. **(2)**

I observed all of these symptoms in the interviewees I spoke with.

However, PTSD often develops following one significant stressful event or a series of stressful events giving rise to a pattern of emotional responses and a recognized pattern of behaviour.

The psychological reactions I observed in this study are quite different to the psychological impact that I have observed in dozens of consultations in my practice as a result of the bushfires 18 months ago. Many of the individuals and families that have consulted me since the bushfires have exhibited symptoms of PTSD, but this has been alleviated somewhat due to the huge level of community support and support from government agencies for these people. They have experienced being part of a supportive and compassionate community and levels of government and voluntary organisations that acknowledge their situation and are doing all they can to help. This has led to a sense of optimism that circumstances will improve and some sense of normality will return.

By contrast, the community members I interviewed in this study often expressed feeling isolated and unsupported; additionally, they are “up against” an insidious and intangible threat that has existed for seven years and continues to grow, leading to huge uncertainty about the future. The trauma remains very real and unresolved.

The collation of these emotional and psychological responses to this kind of threat is consistent with similar reports in the literature. Albrecht et al in 2007 coined the term “solastalgia” to describe the sense of loss that people experience when their land is damaged and they lose amenity and opportunity. **(3)**

Solastalgia is “the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault” and where there is “erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation”.

**Amongst this group of interviewees, this sense of loss has occurred even before possible approval of the project.**

**The proponent’s EES contains no understanding of this impact on the health and well-being of the community, and no strategies to address this. Indeed, the information provided by these interviewees reveals a proponent that has no concern for the psychological impact of its behaviour.**

As reported, this impact is exacerbated by the proponent’s public communication and activities designed to present the proponent as “a good corporate citizen”, when many of the receptors know from experience that the opposite is true.

My research has revealed the deep and enduring psychological impact on all residents interviewed, who live very close to the proposed mine site. The research outlines the impact the proponent’s activities have had already in recent years, at a stage of the project where a mining license has not yet been granted.

The proponent’s EES makes no reference to the potential impact of the mine on the wider community living and working in the Glenaladale, Lindenow and Bairnsdale region, nor the community’s concerns about dust, contamination of water supply and damage to the Gippsland Lakes. When extrapolated to the wider community of Bairnsdale, Lakes Entrance, Paynesville and surrounds, all of these threats have the potential to cause a greater degree of anxiety and stress in a community of more than 30,000 residents.

## CONCLUSION

**This creates a circumstance of triple jeopardy for the East Gippsland community.**

Firstly, this research has demonstrated that the proponent’s actions have already led to sustained and perhaps irreversible psychological damage to nearby residents.

Secondly, the proponent has not offered any strategies to reduce, ameliorate or compensate for this injury.

Thirdly, the proponent has not acknowledged, nor considered strategies to address, the potential impact of more widespread fear, anxiety, anger and sadness amongst the larger East Gippsland community as more details of this project become publicly available, and/or if the proposal is approved.

*The best indicator of future behaviour is past behaviour.*

The potential for this project, if approved, to cause widespread disruption to social cohesion, psychological health and natural human optimism within the East Gippsland community is very real.

## REFERENCES

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