

2021

Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue Perceptions Study Summary Report

PERCEPTIONS STUDY SUMMARY REPORT 2021

Background

The Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue (UHMD) was established in 2011 in response to community concerns about infrastructure and services, mine rehabilitation, and water and air quality concerns and is tasked with supporting engagement between the Upper Hunter community and local coal mines.

The UHMD engages with mining industry stakeholders, members from the Upper Hunter Community and local business and Local Government stakeholders. The UHMD is a collaborative effort that addresses the local community's concerns by understanding these concerns and then working together to develop and implement solutions. The UHMD undertakes semi-regular research within the community and involved parties to assess current perceptions of mining within the community and of the impact of the UHMD.

NSW Minerals Council has engaged Stable Research to undertake the third survey of its kind. This report was prepared in collaboration between Stable Research and Leap Insights and seeks to present the findings of the research conducted into current perceptions regarding mining in the community and the UHMD. The UHMD will use the outcomes of report to help guide future activities.

Key Findings

Environmental consideration of air and water quality, rehabilitation and the future of mining emerge as key areas of engagement and concern by members, both currently and in the future.

There are mixed views about mining and the impact on the Upper Hunter. Recognition of opportunities presented by mining and their efforts at increased efficiencies and innovation are being offset by negative environmental and aesthetic consequences as a result of the extent of mining in the area.

Most stakeholders agree that a collaborative effort is required to address the future of the Upper Hunter and the impact mining has had on the region. Recognition of opportunities presented by mining and their efforts at increased efficiencies and innovation are being offset by negative environmental and aesthetic consequences as a result of the extent of mining in the area.

The economic and environmental future of the Upper Hunter region after mining ceases to operate is the key concern, and what the pathway to transition looks like.

The UHMD is a useful and well-regarded platform for community engagement, both about mining and the broader implications of mining – including a post-mining future. The UHMD might increase relevance and reach by using its role as a facilitator of conversation to bring key stakeholders, including government representation, together to discuss and consider a strategic planning process for the area. Given the mining industry's obligations with regards to rehabilitation, they remain a key stakeholder in this space. A specific focus on this will have value to the community and business partners.

Rehabilitation is an area of focus for community members and needs to remain a priority for the UHMD. However, you would benefit from communicating progress on rehabilitation in the area and sharing innovative ideas for rehabilitation with the broader community. This is also an area which could drive better engagement from a wider range of community members. Tying rehabilitation into future economic opportunities and working with mines & government to have a more holistic plan to rehabilitation across the various mines would be valued.

Air quality remains a visible issue in the minds of the community, and as such needs to remain a focus for the UHMD. Monitoring comparisons between other Australian urban locations, sharing innovation efforts and mitigation strategies with the broader community and ensuring compliance might help with perceptions. Projects that assess other elements of pollution (such as diesel caps on trucks, covering of coal loads and so on) may be welcome.

Consideration should be given to refreshing the joint committees and working groups, and perhaps trying new ways of achieving outcomes and engaging with the community. There is a sense that new blood or a fresh approach may help invigorate the UHMD and increase its effectiveness. It is worth addressing concerns that the UHMD is an “echo-chamber” of people who agree with each other, and ensuring dissenting voices are not just heard, but welcomed may help in this regard.



Future of the Upper Hunter - Transition and Strategic Plan

- Climate change discussions leading to uncertainty of mining
- Replacing economic prosperity effectively
- Develop clear roadmap and strategic economic vision
- UHMD can take leadership position



Environmental Considerations

- Big reason for people joining and leaving UHMD
- Support progressive rehabilitation by mining organisations
- Air Quality a major visible concern
- Drive rehabilitation innovation into an economically sustainable future



Community Engagement

- Broaden community engagement by including younger people
- Broaden information sharing beyond participants
- Needs a refresh – injection of new thinkers and contributors

Future of the Upper Hunter – Transition and Strategic Plan

An overarching concern is what the future will look like in the area without mining and its significant current impact and contribution on employment, facilities, and the overall economy. There is a strong desire for greater clarity about the plan surrounding the exit strategy of the mining industry from the Upper Hunter and this rolls out over the short, medium, and longer term.

There are mixed views about the changes in the Upper Hunter over the past five years, with efforts at increased efficiencies and innovation offset by negative environmental and aesthetic consequences. There is a sense that mining plays an increasing role in the economic prosperity of the region, and it is believed there has been improved access to opportunities through business networking, local procurement processes, and training.

There is strong recognition that mining will remain important to the Upper Hunter for at least the next 5 years due to global demand and the reliance of the Australian and local economy on mining industries. It is also acknowledged that it will take more than five years to disengage from fossil fuels.

Collaboration is of key importance to participants, and there is recognition that the Upper Hunter benefits from coal mining in the area.

Regarding the **future of mining**, globally concerns have been raised about fossil fuels and climate change leading to the uncertainty of the future of mining. The majority of respondents cited the need for urgent strategic planning to address the economic gap that the departure of mining from the region will create. The strategic planning process needs to involve the 4 key stakeholders in the community – mining, business, government and the general population – in order to develop a clear roadmap for when the decline in mining might occur. Whilst there is no consensus on when this may begin to impact the community, the UHMD is uniquely placed to bring all the main stakeholders together to facilitate the creation of the strategic economic and social vision the Upper Hunter is seeking.

There is growing concern amongst community stakeholders about a lack of a **strategic plan** to address the gap that mining will leave in the future as global pressure and local support of energy providers which are more sustainable come into existence. There is apparent disconnect in the growing concerns and the effort being made to address those concerns. This is being made worse by the lack of a coherent government/business led regional plan and existing planning laws.

Future possibilities are broad. The overarching sense is that the future is a blank canvas but that it requires a strategic roadmap and plan to optimise the opportunities available to the area.

There is recognition that it is unlikely that one industry will be able to take the place of mining, and thus there will be a need for a variety of different types of industries and an innovative approach to maintain the economic prosperity of the region.

Opportunities

- Drive dialogue and strategic planning for the future of Upper Hunter beyond mining.
- Grave concerns from the community need to be addressed – bring all stakeholders to the table.
- Draw the connection between the ideas for rehabilitation and the future economy – ideas align.
- Can local Govt brought along at pace to address these concerns? Idea scenario.

Environmental Considerations

In terms of the impacts of current mining activities, air quality and rehabilitation are the two primary issues. Rehabilitation, pollution and transitioning to industries of the future are aspects that need changing when it comes to mining. Some call to limit mining activity and alter contract-based employment.

There is recognition of increased efficiencies and innovation with regards to dust control, rehabilitation and water management. However, the extent of mining has grown, and its impact on the environment is large and visible, specifically with regards to voids, rehabilitated “hills”, land degradation and increased pollution.

Air Quality

Air quality remains a visible issue in the minds of the community, and as such needs to remain a focus for the UHMD. Monitoring comparisons between other Australian urban locations, sharing innovation efforts and mitigation strategies with the broader community and ensuring compliance might help with perceptions. Projects that assess other elements of pollution (such as diesel caps on trucks, covering of coal loads and so on) may be welcome.

Opportunities

- **Improving air quality**
 - Rehabilitation (and limiting further mining) is a key sensible solution for many. Rehabilitating land faster means there will be less dust to be swept up in the wind.
 - This ties into their concern that mines are not keeping up with their obligations regarding progressive rehabilitation and are not being held accountable for this.
- **Monitoring air quality and mining activities**
 - Provide trusting source of information surrounding mines “doing the right thing” when it comes to management of mining activities and adherence to dust limitation practices.
 - Can more work be done to ensure the mines have the most optimal dust emission reduction policies possible, and continual monitoring, innovation and upgrading of plans.
 - Clear monitoring of the weather / wind direction and adjusting plans accordingly; including when and when not to blast and having adequate waters trucks and equipment set up for the situation at any point in time.
 - Ensure loads are covered in both directions, and mining diesel trucks are fitted with filters.
 - An independent monitoring body would serve the community better.
 - There is some concern that monitoring protocols and reduction plans might not always be implemented, and a call for stricter adherence and harsher penalties for those who do not do so.
 - A more global governmental approach was also suggested for dust mitigation, which was to place caps on the overall number of mines operating at any one time depending on the weather / conditions.
 - Improved communication about the facts regarding health impacts from dust made available to those who are concerned and the mitigation measures, monitoring and comparisons with other parts of the country that show it is not so bad (as a clear point of comparison).

- **Communicating on Water Quality**
 - Separate out the impact of mining and other environmental factors on water quality
 - Independent monitoring of pollution and aquatic life impacts
 - Not a major factor, but cannot really focus on air quality alone, as this will lead to increased misinformation or incorrect anecdotal evidence, so it is important to give water quality attention while focusing efforts on air quality

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is an area of focus for community members and needs to remain a priority for the UHMD. The UHMD would benefit from communicating progress on rehabilitation in the area and sharing innovative ideas for rehabilitation with the broader community. This is also an area which could drive better engagement from a wider range of community members. Tying rehabilitation into future economic opportunities and working with mines & government to have a more holistic plan to rehabilitation across the various mains would be valued.

Opportunities

- Taking the lead in conversations and strategic planning for rehabilitation to benefit the community as a whole
- Increasing the rate of change to better support community expectations.
- Introducing independent monitoring and communication to all stakeholders.
- Open discussion about creative use of rehabilitating space.
- Broaden the scope of rehabilitation beyond land use to include infrastructure and structures.

Community Engagement

The need for a broader reach and greater community involvement are opportunities within the UHMD. The UHMD is well regarded and perceived to have contributed positively to the relationship between the community and the mining industry.

The UHMD provides access to useful information & expertise that helps shape the narrative in the community, but also enables better decision making by leaders. The UHMD's role as an impartial facilitator of conversation between the different stakeholders of the mining industry, community, business and government means it is believed to be perfectly placed to drive conversation and action on the future of the region in the face of less certainty about mining's role.

The benefit of the UHMD is in breaking down barriers and improving the flow of information between stakeholders, as well as improving access to opportunities for local businesses.

There is a sense that the UHMD has a narrow base of community engagement and lacks adequate reach with the broader community.

Some felt that the UHMD primarily involved middle of the road collaborators, rather than those who hold more extreme views, giving it limited reach in terms of sharing facts and information with the wider community, and thus makes it less effective than it could be.

The need for a broader reach and greater community involvement are the main weaknesses within UHMD. Consideration should be given to refreshing the joint committees and working groups, and perhaps trying new ways of achieving outcomes and engaging with the community. There is a sense that new participants or a fresh approach may help invigorate the UHMD and increase its effectiveness. This may present an opportunity to invite and actively seek younger stakeholders to participate in the UHMD, improving the ongoing participation rates.

It is worth addressing concerns that the UHMD is an "echo-chamber" of people who agree with each other, and ensuring dissenting voices are not just heard, but welcomed may help in this regard.

Opportunities

- Community participation has decreased in the UHMD in recent years.
- There is a lack of representation of extreme views in the UHMD.
- Involvement in UHMD - Many (n=16) do not currently do so, however, are interested in finding out more about these options.
- 52% of respondents have had no change in the level of involvement, but those who have become less involved gave the following reasons:
 - Primarily due to impacts of COVID – no face-to-face meetings, too many (other) zoom meetings
 - Moved away from the area / retiring
 - Too far to travel – but no progress on rehabilitation makes it frustrating
- The need for a broader reach and greater community involvement are opportunities within the UHMD.
 - Attract younger people to UHMD to expand thought leaders
 - Attract extreme views to broaden opinions (overly collaborative)
- Improve communication with participants

Stable Research
ABN 80 627 059 643

Established 2003

Level 2, 862-874 Elizabeth Street, Waterloo NSW 2017
P: 02 8556 8850 | E: clientenquiries@stableresearch.com.au
www.stableresearch.com.au

Authors: Katie Ferro and Sharlene Zeederberg

Prepared for: NSW Minerals Council

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