

Upper Hunter Mining Dialogue

Review of Opportunities in Community Perceptions Research Project

October 2022

Summary

Respondents indicated that the Dialogue's key areas of concern remain air quality, rehabilitation of mining sites, and the lack of a strategic plan surrounding the future of the Upper Hunter region. More than half of the respondents are concerned about what the future looks like without mining, and there is a desire for greater clarity about the short, medium, and long-term plans for the region. There were also various suggestions to improve engagement with the Dialogue's current membership and attract new stakeholders to broaden the perspectives included.

The Dialogue agrees with the three key issues identified and this feedback reflects the information gathered through the Dialogue's regular community surveys undertaken at local community events. The following document has been prepared to provide a response from the Dialogue to the opportunities that were listed in the final perceptions research report by Stable Research that captured the survey respondent feedback.

Feedback and opportunities are grouped under three broad themes including:

- **1: Future of the Upper Hunter** - outlining what the Dialogue is doing to assist with strategic planning for the future of the Upper Hunter
- **2: Environmental Considerations** - providing information about various environmental impacts, and what the Dialogue is doing to address air, water, and rehabilitation issues
- **3: Community Engagement and Involvement** - detailing the Dialogue's approach and actions to improve community engagement and involvement

1. Future of the Upper Hunter

What survey respondents told us

Respondent feedback focused on the role that the Dialogue can play in driving and facilitating community discussions about strategic planning for the region, given that more than half of the respondents were concerned about what the future looks like without mining. The feedback also noted the importance of harnessing concerns from all relevant stakeholders, and to bring the local government along in addressing these issues. Respondents acknowledged the connection that mine rehabilitation will play in future land use across the region.

What the Dialogue is doing

In response to the strong survey feedback, the Dialogue's 2022 Community Forum event theme is appropriately focused on 'Planning for the Future' and will explore key community issues such as economic diversification, upcoming site closures and their plans for post-mining land use, government-led strategic plans for the Upper Hunter, and potential new opportunities for the region in the future. See the [2022 Community Forum](#).

The Dialogue has long advocated for a whole of government-led strategic plan for the future Upper Hunter. There are various state and local government led plans underway, and the region would greatly benefit from a comprehensive plan that ties all this work together.

The Dialogue is also uniquely well-positioned to help facilitate connections between the state government, industry, business, local government, and community stakeholders on such matters, as it

s of vital importance that all stakeholders are engaged and actively contributing to future plans for the region.

The focus on strategic planning and future land use will be a continued priority for the Dialogue for many years to come and will likely feature at various Dialogue Committees and Working Group discussions, as well as through future Community Forum events.

2. Environmental Considerations

a. Improving air quality and monitoring mining activity

What respondents told us

Respondent feedback focused on the need for trusted sources of information about air quality, as well as the need for independent monitoring and compliance protocols to ensure industry were doing the right thing and being held accountable for their air quality impacts. There was concern that sites were not implementing emissions reduction plans. Respondents also advised that improved communication about the facts regarding health impacts from dust would benefit the community.

What the Dialogue is doing

There is opportunity for the Dialogue to share more information on the considerable number of industry and government air quality programs and initiatives, as well as Dialogue projects. The Dialogue will communicate outcomes from existing projects and initiatives to stakeholders through our various news channels.

The Dialogue has an opportunity to share information regarding the following air quality projects and initiatives:

- **Upper Hunter Air Quality Monitoring Network** - The NSW Government and Upper Hunter coal and power industries established a network of fourteen air quality monitoring stations in 2010, which is independently monitored by the NSW Department of Planning and Environment and overseen by an Advisory Committee. See: [Upper Hunter Air Quality Monitoring Network](#).
- **Analysis of Upper Hunter Air Quality Monitoring Network Data** - The Dialogue analysed Upper Hunter Air Quality Monitoring Network data from its inception to 2019 to determine how air quality in the Upper Hunter has changed and how it compares with other locations. See: [Air Quality Analysis](#).
- **Clearing the Air information video** - The Dialogue produced an information video which lists various actions that the mining industry undertakes to minimise air quality impacts, which include postponing blasting, operating at lower levels, limiting traffic, wetting dry areas, reducing vehicle speeds, and ceasing all operations when necessary. See: [Clearing the Air](#).
- **NSW EPA regulatory compliance programs** - The NSW EPA regularly implements monitoring programs or seasonal blitzes to ensure industry compliance with monitoring protocols and minimising dust impacts. See: NSW EPA - [Tackling Coal Mine Dust](#).
- **Air Quality Fact Sheets** - The Dialogue developed two related fact sheets, with the first covering what particulate matter is, and why it is important, while the second listed various actions to improve air quality and manage impacts. See [Air Quality Fact Sheets](#).

Mines operating in the Upper Hunter must abide by the relevant air quality regulations set in NSW, and each mine is part of the independent regional-wide monitoring undertaken. Industry regularly reviews their policies and procedures to ensure they reflect current standards and meet community and regulator expectations.

Minimising dust is a part of daily work procedures at Upper Hunter mines and is the responsibility of all mine workers. Each mine is required to undertake a cumulative impact assessment, and there is a sustained coordinated approach between neighbouring mines to minimise environmental impacts including air quality.

Some respondents commented on issues that may be beyond the scope of the Dialogue's capacity to address, including developing a more global governmental approach to dust mitigation, and ensuring load coverings and filters for diesel trucks. Considerable investigations have been conducted into load coverings at an industry level, however the Dialogue secretariat understands that this was determined not to be feasible on a practical level. The Dialogue could investigate further with industry and report back.

Another area the Dialogue could make some progress is to communicate about health impacts and air quality in the Upper Hunter, and something that the Dialogue can explore through the 2022 Forum Event discussion session.

b. Communicating on Water Quality

What respondents told us

Feedback identified that while water quality was currently less of a priority (likely due to the prolonged wetter conditions), there is a need to provide a sustained focus on water issues to continue to improve community awareness and understanding of how mining uses water and actions to minimise impacts on water quality. Specific feedback touched upon the potential for independent monitoring of pollution and aquatic life impacts, and to separate out the impact of mining and other environmental factors on water quality.

What the Dialogue is doing

The Dialogue agrees that sharing information from existing Dialogue water projects and industry initiatives will continue to provide the community with important facts on water, as water has the potential to easily become a concern in dry conditions.

The Dialogue has an opportunity to share information regarding the following water quality and stewardship projects and initiatives:

- **Water Accounting Framework** - The Dialogue provides an annual snapshot of industry's water use in the context of other water users in the Upper Hunter. The project has improved the transparency and community understanding of industry's water use. See [Water Accounting Framework](#).
- **Hunter River Water Quality (HRSTS) Assessment** - The Dialogue completed a two-stage water quality assessment to determine the overall health of the Hunter River and examine the impact of metals and metalloids in the Hunter River due to mining activity. See [Water Quality Assessment](#).
- **Water Stewardship Fact Sheet** - The Dialogue is currently preparing a fact sheet to help improve understanding and awareness of industry initiatives and actions to reuse, recycle, and limit impacts to other Hunter River water users, using case studies.

The Dialogue has extensively reviewed both mining's water use and the impact of mining on water quality in the Upper Hunter. The mining industry regularly monitors background water quality and other environmental factors to understand its impact on any receiving waters from any site water discharges. The Dialogue has not yet examined the impact on aquatic life directly, so this may be a potential opportunity for the Dialogue's Joint Working Groups to explore in further detail in the future.

c. Rehabilitation

What respondents told us

Respondents would like to see an increase in the rate of rehabilitation to better align with community expectations, as there was concern that sites are not keeping up with progressive rehabilitation obligations. Respondents also noted improving rehabilitation can positively impact air quality and reduce dust lift off. Respondents are also seeking open discussion about alternative post-mining land uses of rehabilitated land, and for this to include existing infrastructure and structures. Respondents felt the Dialogue could lead conversations surrounding strategic planning for rehabilitation, which would benefit the community. Additionally, respondents were supportive of independent monitoring and communication to all stakeholders.

What the Dialogue is doing

The Dialogue has an opportunity to improve community understanding and better align with expectations with regards to rehabilitation, and this may be best achieved through sharing findings from key Dialogue projects and initiatives, as well as providing additional information regarding the rehabilitation process and clearly defining the roles of both industry and government departments with respect to rehabilitation.

The NSW Resources Regulator is responsible for regulating rehabilitation in NSW, which involves independently monitoring rehabilitation and regularly inspecting Upper Hunter mining operations to ensure they are complying with their rehabilitation obligations.

Industry is required to comply with their approvals or consents to rehabilitate land to a condition agreed to in the early stages of the mining operations. They are required to submit annual rehabilitation progress reviews to the Regulator and forecast future rehabilitation objectives, with new rehabilitation reforms now placing a greater focus on post-mining land uses and to drive industry to deliver rehabilitation in as timely a fashion as possible.

Demonstrating progressive rehabilitation can be a difficult story to communicate externally, and the Dialogue recognises the need to reconsider how we can showcase industry's progress in delivering mine rehabilitation projects. However, there are important factors that should be understood to ensure that industry's rehabilitation progress can better align with community expectations, including:

- Rehabilitation is an ongoing, progressive process which takes many years and significant expertise, research and practice involved.
- Many Upper Hunter operations rehabilitate disturbed land to native vegetation and do this successfully, such that the rehabilitated land may appear to be indistinguishable from nearby unmined land.
- During the active operation of a mine, there may only be a limited amount of land that is available to be rehabilitated as much of the disturbed land awaiting rehabilitation is likely being used in some capacity.

Sharing information on the following Dialogue rehabilitation and land use projects will help to demonstrate industry's rehabilitation progress, and that industry is planning for productive and sustainable post-mining land uses throughout the lifecycle of mining, including:

- **Rehabilitation Principles and Commitments** - All Upper Hunter mining operations are progressively rehabilitating land disturbed by mining to provide temporary or final cover to minimise land or air quality impacts. This annual reporting project has now collated up to 10 years of rehabilitation and disturbance data across the Upper Hunter to provide a yearly report and has increased transparency on industry's progress. See: [Rehabilitation Reporting Results](#).

- **Cattle Grazing Trials** - The Dialogue has supported several industry studies which demonstrate that rehabilitated mine land can support long-term sustainable and profitable cattle grazing in the Upper Hunter. See [Cattle Grazing Trials](#).
- **Beneficial Reuse of Voids** - The Dialogue has long been supportive of increasing flexibility for innovative post-mining land uses through our extensive Beneficial Reuse of Voids project reports, with a summary report published tying all this work together. See [Beneficial Reuse of Voids](#).
- **Synoptic Plan** - The Dialogue has long been an advocate for a review of the Synoptic Plan, which was a strategic regional land use plan for the Upper Hunter, and helped coordinate Stakeholder Workshops, to facilitate discussions between community, industry, and the government.

The Dialogue welcomes recent shifts towards providing greater flexibility in allowing the use of existing mine infrastructure in post-mining land use, which was flagged in the Draft Hunter Regional Plan 2041.

While not yet government policy, this is a positive step and with the final plan due in late 2022, the Dialogue's Community Forum event is well-positioned for further discussion on this matter.

3. Community Involvement and Engagement

What respondents told us

There is declining community participation in the Dialogue in recent years, and a perception of narrow engagement and a lack of diversity in representation (particularly from younger community members and those with 'extreme' views). Main reasons cited for reduced involvement in the Dialogue included retiring, moving away, and the distance required to travel, as well as reduced face-to-face meetings. Respondents encouraged efforts to improve communications across the Dialogue's various channels.

What the Dialogue is doing

The Dialogue requires community support and participation to function effectively, and we regularly engage with community members and representatives from interest groups to ensure strong community representation. Engagement methods include communication channels such as direct emails, twice-yearly newsletters, our website and social media, attendance at community events and columns in local newspapers.

However, we recognise there are additional efforts we can take to ensure that the Dialogue membership remains diverse and reflects the current community of the Upper Hunter. Stakeholders interested in joining the Dialogue should contact info@miningdialogue.com.au to learn more about how they can be involved in the Dialogue, whether actively participating in our Forum and Joint Working Groups, or keeping engaged through our e-newsletter.

The Dialogue is continuing to ensure that we explore innovative and effective ways of communicating to our various stakeholders by:

- Providing briefings to recently elected Councillors across the Upper Hunter;
- Inserting 'The Dialogue' newsletter in a recent edition of Hunter River Times, reaching up to 12,000 community members;
- Setting up an online community survey to reach a wider audience, which generates timelier periodic feedback;
- Regular calls for new community participation through various communications channels (e.g., e-newsletters, social media, and the back page of 'The Dialogue' newsletter; and
- Inviting relevant community members and local environment and farming interest groups to participate in the Dialogue's Pasture Research Discussion & Field Day, planned for early 2023.