

# BUSINESS HUNTER

8 July 2024

Committee Secretariat  
Standing Committee on State Development  
Parliament of New South Wales

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Dear Chair

## **Beneficial and productive post-mining land use**

Business Hunter is pleased to have the opportunity to consider and contribute to the Inquiry into the beneficial and productive post-mining land use (the Inquiry).

Business Hunter is the peak business group for Australia's largest regional economy. We serve more than 4,400 member and affiliate businesses operating across the Hunter region, representative of industries spanning all sectors and all sizes of business, from start-ups through to some of the nation's most prolific organisations.

## **Introduction and Background**

We believe the terms of reference (ToR) for the inquiry are comprehensive and combine elements that will draw out details on issues that currently surround the prospect of beneficial re-use of mining lands. They also allow scope for looking ahead as the Hunter region moves into a period of potential and significant change.

The fundamental fact that makes this Inquiry an extremely important and relevant concern to the community of the Hunter region is the historical and current co-location of the active and diverse community with mining activity that has, or is taking place.

Many of the villages that make up the current urban areas in the Hunter Valley were developed from a direct association with mining. They served as the worker accommodation and communities for mining activity and the locations in some cases were considered remote at the time. As mining activity evolved and closed, particularly in the eastern portion of the Hunter Valley, the towns reached diversity thresholds where they were able to continue to exist and grow without a singular reliance on the direct influence of mining activity to support them.

Understandably, therefore, the issue of the reuse of mining, power station and associated buffer lands has been topical in the Hunter region for some time. There are already examples where such land is being repurposed and these will, and should serve

as 'case studies' for learnings and devising methods to optimise the processes and frameworks around these sorts of projects.

This is a relatively unique characteristic of the Hunter and has contributed to the broadening of the base of economic and social support for many of the communities across the region. The residents and businesses within the region and its communities are not universally and singularly tied to the mining or power industries.

### **Issues and Commentary**

In the process of engagement concerning the ToR, Business Hunter has found there are several common elements expressed that will exercise the consideration of the Inquiry committee.

1. The government forming a view and articulating a policy and strategy around the adaptive reuse of mining, power station and associated buffer lands so that there is clarity for respective agencies and local government to provide consistency in their strategies and the approach to implementing change.
2. Barriers exist related to the complexities of existing planning regimes governing the mine closure processes and rehabilitation of mining lands. These constrain, complicate, and impair the concept of adaptive reuse and the feasibility of the outcomes. This extends to secondary planning and regulatory processes that relate to rezoning and subsequent development consents and the time these processes can take.
3. Understanding the extent of existing mine related infrastructure networks and installations established to support the mining operations and the level to which these can be adapted to service and support reuse proposals.
4. Recognising the mine operator and proponents of the future development of a mine or power station site will invariably be unrelated parties. Complex, enduring conditions of consent relating to proposed adaptive reuse of mining lands, binding the mining companies could be a disincentive to the outcome being achieved. Similarly, subsequent landowners will be concerned about taking on conditions that impose additional or former mining related requirements in which they have no expertise or experience.

Business Hunter is confident that in relation to the Hunter region, the Inquiry will receive submissions that fully scope the ToR's. The following discussion and comments identify areas of the ToR of relevance to our interests, and we commend these to the Committee.

- A. *The benefits of having multiple successive land uses including the positive benefits for local communities and the economy, business, industry, and the broader state.*

This principle is highly desirable and a natural outcome in the context of the Hunter Valley. The scope of the opportunity for beneficial reuse of former mining lands is extensive. Business Hunter understands in the Hunter Valley, there is over 38,000 hectares of land that in the context of mining, is either rehabilitated, in the process of being rehabilitated, disturbed or current operational land. This is exclusive of buffer

lands, lands in agricultural use or reserved for environmental offset as well as power station sites and their buffer lands which should be included in the scope of this review.

Quite clearly, there will not be a 'one size fits all' outcome for formulating a pathway to re-use these lands or the outcome itself. The planning, regulatory and implementing regimes that are devised will need to be flexible to accommodate a wide range of circumstances. The location, characteristics and features of respective sites will each have an influence on the capability and capacity of land to be reused. For example, some lands will not be fit or suitable for consideration for reuse in urban or industrial forms and more suitable for agricultural, environmental or low intensity economic uses.

The important part in these processes will be to signal early in the timeline what the future use of the lands will be. As mining activity finishes, there will inevitably be a gap between operational mining activity ceasing and the take up and commissioning of the future use. Having the future use clearly articulated will give communities the ability to assess the holding over capacity and reduce the loss of jobs and economic activity as the land merges from one use to another.

*B. Changes in land use potential and demand in established or traditional mining areas, particularly those generated by the decarbonised economy, renewable technology, manufacturing, defence, skills, and training.*

Business Hunter is of the view the Hunter region is well placed to consider and action the turbo charging of existing industry and business as a significant element and contributor in the evolution of the region as power stations close and mining of coal levels off and declines in the long term. The region already possesses the capacity and capability to service new industries, should they establish, with a diverse, skilled, and experienced workforce and diverse industry base already in place.

Consequently, initiatives for the future can be built and structured around existing industry and its characteristics. In time, and as the new opportunities emerge, the workforce can expand and adapt without the prospect of having to pre-empt the timing and mobilising for something new and completely different.

This principle also extends to the region using opportunities already at its disposal. The research institutions located here such as the Newcastle Institute of Energy and Resources (NIER), the Hunter Medical Research Institute (HMRI) and CSIRO Energy Centre have international reputations and highly regarded output. In many cases, tailored measures supporting innovation and technology would mean ideas that start here, can stay here. They would either leverage existing business and industrial networks or provide start up and scale up opportunity for new industries.

This will produce a flow on effect which materialises in a higher demand for land and buildings, which some of the future land reuse sites would be well placed to accommodate.

C. *Opportunities for investment and growth in training and skills in established or traditional mining areas, including:*

- *The need to reskill and or retrain current workforces.*
- *The impact and effectiveness of existing and new education, training, and skills providers for mining communities.*

There is no doubt there will be a time and place to escalate the activity in the realm of workforce reskilling, upskilling and training if programs and projects for adaptive reuse of lands generate new activity and are successful.

It must be recognised that the land is not the only consideration or asset in the circumstances of assessing reuse opportunity. The demographic and workforce characteristics of the surrounding communities are also important in being able to accommodate the change in activity.

A contemporary report<sup>1</sup> found that 70% of the Hunter and Central Coast workforce would be willing to re-train for a job opportunity. The report authors surmised this relatively high level of response reflected an “*understanding of the need for economic transition in the region*”<sup>2</sup>. The result also reflects the awareness amongst the community of the opportunity that lies ahead and the industry diversity that exists within the region.

The question of the ability for businesses to pivot is not so straight forward. Whilst an individual can re-train from being an engineer to say a project manager, a fabricating business might not be so great at becoming café. This must be considered in the context of the desirability of the various communities in the Hunter wanting and needing to maintain important components of their existing economic base and then building on it as new land uses, business, industry, and demand develops.

The approach should be to have new industry and business develop in addition to current elements, not instead of them.

This demands that alongside re-training and reskilling opportunities for the workforce, businesses are not overlooked. The embedding of business support and advisory services will be vital to ensure they are given the best chance to survive the local evolution. The types, timing and level of support will vary and, in many cases, can mimic existing support measures such as the Business Connect program.

This type of support also provides some mitigation and insurance against businesses being forced to close with the resultant loss of employment and economic activity. It can be said, it is preferable to revive and sustain an existing business than to watch one die and then seek out a replacement.

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter Horizons: Navigating the future of work and workplaces in our Region, Institute for Regional Futures, June 2024

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

Communities can fall into a hole as they wait across the period from mine closure to the implementation and integration of the next land use. It is also a period where businesses, in the absence of a definite strategic community plan will, and can make quick decisions on restructuring or closing the business. These decisions are not always communicated well in advance and thus can cause stress and dislocation when they occur.

*G. The need to develop a robust independent regulatory framework to maintain and advance best practice in this area.*

The concept of a robust and independent framework is important given the scope of the challenges and the plethora of controls and regulation already in place governing mine activity prior to, during and after operations cease. Whilst Business Hunter is not well placed to comment on the aspects of all these controls, we are well placed to know that complexity in regulation and operation are a significant disincentive for investment and development.

This is an issue often reflected in our regular Business Condition Surveys that point out the negative impact of “red tape” and “complexity”, identifying them as pain points for business and a constraint on economic efficiency.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment and would be happy to expand on these matters and appear before the committee if required.

We look forward to the Inquiry progressing and the release of further documentation that articulates the government’s strategic priorities and intentions in relation to the beneficial reuse of mining, power station and related buffer lands for the future.

Your sincerely,



**Bob Hawes**  
**CEO**  
**Business Hunter**