Friday, 13 December 2013

**Statement on Warkworth modification assessment**

The Department of Planning and Infrastructure categorically denies any suggestion of collusion in assessing Rio Tinto’s application to modify its Warkworth mining operation.

No approval has been given to date and the community will continue to have the opportunity to have its say.

The department has been assessing the impacts and issues relating to the extension of this mine in detail for more than four years and is acutely aware of the concerns being raised.

We are also conscious that the mine employs some 1,300 people and the constraints on the existing operations put these jobs at risk. During the public exhibition period, the Department received 1,128 submissions, almost 1,000 of which supported the proposed extension.

In consideration of the important local factors at play, we have expedited our assessment. However, all existing legal and community rights have been retained throughout, including the right for the community to have its say. This will continue when the independent Planning Assessment Commission holds a public meeting next Thursday, 19 December before making its final decision.

Much of the criticism to date relates to process, rather than the substantive issues relating to the impacts of the modification. The reality is that, in the context of the overall mining operation and the previously proposed expansion, the current modification represents a 1 per cent increase to the mining footprint that was approved in 2003. (See map attached)

The department’s assessment shows that the proposed extension would have a negligible impact on noise, air quality, visual amenity and water resources. The Department is also satisfied that the 94 hectares of additional biodiversity offsets would more than compensate for the loss of 16 hectares of degraded woodland.

Moreover, the conditions the department has recommended require Warkworth to operate within its existing noise and dust limits and they strengthen the regulation of the mine.

All these important issues have been lost in the debate over process.

The department is satisfied that the benefits of securing the future employment of the 1,300 people that work at the mine far outweighs the costs of the proposed extension, and is therefore clearly in the public interest.

The department is obliged to consider every application on its merits, and stands by the rigour, integrity and independence of its assessments.

Our assessment of the proposed Warkworth modification is no exception.

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Map of proposed modification – blue section indicates proposed new mining area