Thursday, 28 February 2013

**Unprecedented scrutiny to apply to Watermark Coal Project**

Public comment is being sought on the proposed Watermark Coal Project near Gunnedah, which is set to become one of the most thoroughly scrutinised mining projects in the State’s history.

As part of a comprehensive assessment process, the project will be fully considered against to the Government’s Strategic Regional Land Use Policy, which is the result of 18 months worth of community and stakeholder consultation.

The new measures that will now apply for the first time include referral to the independent Gateway Panel for advice and key additional safeguards for aquifers and valuable agricultural land.

The Department of Planning and Infrastructure today placed the project’s Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on public exhibition **until Friday 26 April 2013** – an extended period of two months.

A number of technical experts have already been engaged to assist with the assessment.

The applicant, Shenhua Watermark Coal Pty Ltd, proposes to:

- extract up to 10 million tonnes of coal per year for 30 years, using open cut mining techniques;
- construct and operate a range of associated infrastructure, such as a coal handling and preparation plant, rail spur line, rail loop, loading facility and mine access roads;
- transport coal from the mine by rail; and
- progressively rehabilitate the site.

The department’s Acting Director-General Richard Pearson said a number of independent panels would be involved in the project’s assessment, with particular emphasis being given to the potential impacts on valuable water and agricultural resources.

“The Watermark Coal Project will be one of the most scrutinised mines in the State’s history,” Mr Pearson said.

“Technical experts have already been commissioned to provide independent advice on surface water, groundwater and agricultural impacts throughout the department’s assessment.

“The department will also refer the application to the new Gateway Panel, which is a key outcome of the Government’s Strategic Regional Land Use Policy, released last September.

“This panel, which will be established shortly, will advise the department on issues relating to agricultural and water impacts.
“The input of the Minister for Primary Industries will also be sought in relation to the project’s potential aquifer impacts and the project will be determined by the independent Planning Assessment Commission.

“The Commonwealth Independent Expert Scientific Committee will also provide input to the department’s assessment, and the project will also need approval from the Federal Government.

“By any measure, the assessment process for this project will be extremely thorough.”

In preparing its EIS, the company was required by the department to address a number of key issues, including: agricultural impacts, water resources, biodiversity (including impacts on local koala populations), air quality, noise, visual impacts, local and regional transport issues, social and economic impacts, rehabilitation and cumulative impacts.

In particular, the company has been required to lodge a detailed Agricultural Impact Statement and assess the project against the NSW Aquifer Interference Policy – both new requirements under the Government’s Strategic Regional Land Use Policy.

The company must also demonstrate how it proposes to establish a comprehensive biodiversity offset package and incorporate real-time monitoring of dust and other emissions into its plans for the mine’s operation, should the mine be approved.

Mr Pearson said that while the independent, technical assessment of the project will be extremely thorough, the input of the local community is equally important.

“I encourage all interested members of the public to review the EIS during the extended two month exhibition period.

“I know local residents have already raised a number of concerns, including potential impacts on agricultural land, water resources and biodiversity as well as health and amenity issues.

“Now is the chance for local communities to formally have their say. Public submissions are always a key consideration in the department’s assessment and the company will also be required to respond to all the issues raised.”

The proposed mine, around 25 kilometres south east of Gunnedah near the township of Breeza, is estimated to employ around 600 people during its construction phase and a further 600 full-time operational staff during full production, if approved.

For more information on the project, including where the EIS is being exhibited and how to make a submission, please visit [http://majorprojects.planning.nsw.gov.au](http://majorprojects.planning.nsw.gov.au) and search for “Watermark”.

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NOTE: The Department of Planning and Infrastructure is issuing this media release to encourage the community to take part in the planning process. However, it is the role of the applicant (either through its documents published on our website or otherwise) to provide further specific details about the proposal.