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‘Planning police’ keeping major developments in line

The Department of Planning and Mines, industrial facilities and wind farms across the Southern Highlands will be under greater scrutiny, with the Department of Planning and Environment establishing new compliance teams in Wollongong and Queanbeyan.

Together the Department’s new ‘planning police’ teams will cover the entire Highlands region to ensure coal mines, wind farms, quarries and other state significant developments and infrastructure are following the strict conditions imposed when they are approved.

On-the-spot fines for high impact developments that breach their approval conditions, including coal mines, will be increased five-fold to $15,000.

“Noise, dust, subsidence, environmental effects and other impacts are very real concerns –that’s why the Department puts strict conditions on mining operations and other state significant developments,” a Department spokesperson said.

“These conditions are crucial to helping us strike the right balance between the significant benefits major projects can bring in terms of job creation and investment, and any effects they might have on their neighbours.”

There are now four full-time compliance officers covering the Southern Highlands, with two based in the Department’s Wollongong office and two based in Queanbeyan. Previously compliance investigations in the region were managed from Sydney.

“The vast majority of developments follow the rules, but a local compliance team means more checks and a better chance of any breaches being followed up,” the spokesperson said.

“Coal mines and wind farms will continue to be priorities, but the increase means all types of major developments will now be regularly visited by the ‘planning police’.

“Surveillance and unannounced inspections are two of the many investigation tools at their disposal, so in many cases mines won’t even know they’re being checked.

“Working with the Environmental Protection Authority and local councils, the new teams will soon carry out an audit campaign of a number of the region’s major facilities.”
The spokesperson said compliance officers work closely with the community, industry, local councils and other government agencies to investigate potential breaches of conditions and carry out enforcement where necessary.

“Information from community members is an important way we learn about issues to investigate,” the spokesperson said.

“Enforcement can range from negotiating fixes, issuing penalty notices and in serious cases, criminal prosecutions.”

The Department has carried out more than 750 compliance checks and more than 200 enforcements so far this financial year.

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