‘Planning police’ keeping major developments in line

Mines, abattoirs and other major developments across the state’s west will be under greater scrutiny, with the Department of Planning and Environment establishing new compliance team that will cover the region.

The Department’s new ‘planning police’ team will be based in Queanbeyan, but will work to ensure the west’s mines, industrial facilities and other state significant developments 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 two full-time compliance officers covering western NSW. Previously compliance investigations in the region were managed from Sydney.

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

“Coal mines will continue to be one of our top 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.

“The new team recently completed a road trip across the region to Broken Hill, visiting developments, government agencies and local councils to learn more about issues in the region.”

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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