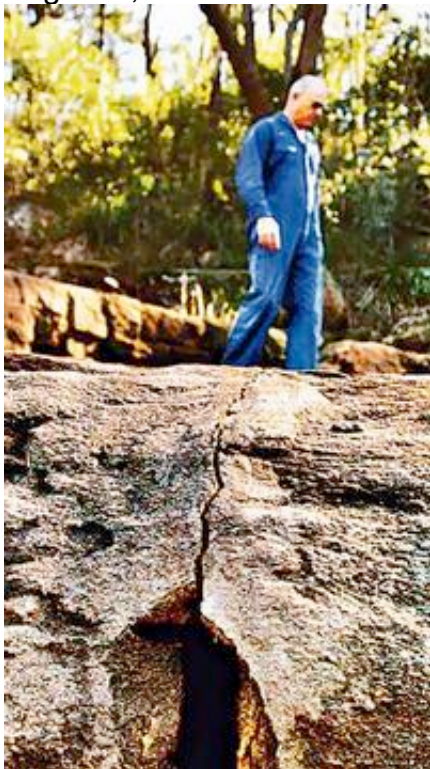


Fury at mining threat to water supply

By Wendy Frew Environment Reporter

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A Nepean Action Group member examines rock cracks near the Georges River Appin.

Photo: *Brendan Esposito*

Sydney's water supply could be put at further risk by a State Government decision to allow BHP Billiton to begin the first stages of underground mining close to the upper Nepean and Cataract rivers, say residents, academics and green groups.

Hawkesbury-Nepean residents say longwall mining has changed little since the 1990s, when large amounts of water in the Cataract River, a tributary of the Nepean, disappeared down cracks in the river bed caused by BHP's Tower colliery built directly underneath the river.

The mining causes river beds to crack, leading to loss of water, land subsidence and rock falls, and could increase salinity if the discharge from the mines is pumped into the rivers.

It also threatens many animal and plant species, says a recent determination by the Government's own scientific committee.

Caroline Graham, a spokeswoman for the residents' Nepean Action Group, said: "It's unbelievable the NSW Government, at a time of increased water restrictions and global warming, would allow further damage to be done to Sydney's water supply." Longwall mining removes a panel of coal by working a face of up to 300 metres wide and up to two kilometres long.

The main problem is subsidence, most of which happens as soon as the underground mining begins. Sometimes there is also residual subsidence.

The group has called on the NSW Government to mandate a one-kilometre safety zone around rivers

to limit damage.

The Government allowed a BHP subsidiary, Illawarra Coal, to build access roads for two new longwall coal mines along the rivers. Pending more approvals, mining will start mid-next year.

The company had intended mining under the Nepean but changed its plans because of public pressure. At the closest point, the longwall mining will now be only 100 metres from Cataract River and 180 metres from the Nepean.

Illawarra Coal told the *Herald* it had made "a significant compromise in terms of continuity of supply and sacrifice of extractable coal reserves ... to address the expectations of the community".

But it said it could not promise the mining would not cause cracking. And it said the company was still conducting studies to assess the likely environmental damage. Illawarra Coal also disputed claims that water was permanently lost from the river from cracking.

A company representative told a public meeting at Campbelltown last month BHP was investigating new grouting techniques to close the cracks. But residents at the meeting said it was unacceptable to treat the rivers as "guinea pigs".

"If you cannot get your science exact ... get back that mining one kilometre from the river and don't treat our rivers as something you can experiment with," said Beth Michie, of National Parks Association. The Minister for Mineral Resources, Kerry Hickey, was not available for comment.

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