

# Boggabri cops a dusting



## Whitehaven Coal, a bad neighbour polluting our air

Tarrawonga Coal Mine, Boggabri NSW 17<sup>th</sup> August 2017



**W**orries about air pollution have escalated in Boggabri and Maules Creek, NSW, following a Report commissioned by the NSW Government which apparently has given the “all-clear” to the mining company Whitehaven Coal.

A consultancy called Katestone Environmental laboured throughout 2016 on behalf of the NSW Department of Planning and NSW Environment Protection Authority, to answer a question vexing many people:

**Is Maules Creek coal mine a rogue polluter requiring punitive action?**

[Katestone Environmental's](#) long-awaited study on the control and management of dust at Whitehaven's Maules Creek megamine was to examine whether the much complained-of coal mine was implementing World's Best Practice in its

management of blasting, excavation, overburden management, coal storage and train loading.

The answer was delivered in August 2017, and has deeply disturbed members of the public from as far away as Narrabri and Boggabri towns, who most days experience the sight of a large grey dust cloud hanging over the [Leard State Forest](#).

The Department of Planning might have breathed a sigh of relief at the news that Maules Creek mine is “generally” compliant, and they won’t have to go toe-to-toe with the politically powerful and well-connected Whitehaven Coal company who might well sue the socks of the NSW Government.

The public did not breathe a sigh of relief, though, because just weeks after the release of the Government-initiated Katestone Report the dust problem is worse than ever.



The Katestone Report concluded that the mine is “*generally consistent with Best Practice*”.

## “Best Practice”?

It’s Business-As-Usual at the Leard Forest coal mine precinct and people are asking what kool-aid the bureaucrats are drinking, if they believe this is Best Practice.

**A eye witness account just weeks after release of Katestone Report**

Best Practice couldn’t be further from the truth at Whitehaven Coal’s two mines in the Leard Forest, as one eye witness reported.

Last week, a gentle drive in the countryside turned into a blinding dust storm for one person passing the Tarrawonga and Maules Creek Coal mines. This is the worst she has ever seen the dust problem at the Leard Forest mine precinct. Travelling from Manilla to Maules Creek, the dust haze was visible above the treetops 7 kilometres away to the north west when driving along Manilla Rd, turning right into Blair Athol Lane.

“There was a general lack of visibility that got worse as I approached the mines’, said the eye-witness.

A regular visitor from Tamworth, she was not prepared for what she saw when she turned the corner into Dripping Rock Road and there was Whitehaven Coal’s Tarrawonga coal mine with bulldozers busily shovelling soil and rock at the base of the cliff face.

Three mine vehicles were furiously digging away, creating large quantities of dust which rose up above them and cloaked the work place with thick clouds of soil and overburden, the crushed rock which needs to be removed to get access to the coal beneath.

Tarrawonga is a smaller mine, not far from the infamous Maules Creek coal, and has largely flown under the radar while its larger stablemate nearly four times the size was opposed by a two-year [blockade camp in which nearly 400 people were arrested](#).



With an extraction limit of 3 Million Tonnes Per Annum, compared with Maules Creek's 13MTPA limit, Tarrawonga has stayed out of the news with the exception of one cheeky ploy in 2014 which reaped Whitehaven Coal a handy [extra 136,045 Million Tonnes over its annual limit](http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/epamedia/EPAMedia14120902.htm).

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(More details of Tarrawonga's long and shameful record of non-compliance are included below.)

Dust complaints are nothing new in the Boggabri and Maules Creek areas which surround the Leard mining precinct, a NSW State Forest that was given over to coal mines in one of the most protested acts of environmental vandalism in Australian history.

### **Dust storm on the road from mining trucks**



The NSW Department of Planning and NSW EPA seem to think air quality is good in the Leard Forest precinct, regularly deflecting community complaints about dust pollution, but in the opinion of the observer:

“I was disgusted that conditions have deteriorated so badly, while the people of Boggabri their complaints about mine dust pollution trivialised.”

**The revealing odyssey through coal country wasn't over yet.**

Some kilometres further, approaching Maules Creek mine itself another source of dust became clearly visible from Leard Forest Road – immense quantities of dust were seen pouring off the exposed areas.



**Over the tops of trees, mining activities were seen creating plumes of dust escaping over the top of the overburden pile at Maules Creek coal mine**



The Katestone Report said the management of overburden and cleared areas at Maules Creek mine is “generally consistent with Best Practice”, but a closer reading of the Report reveals Whitehaven Coal’s continuous and ongoing poor practices, scoring the *lowest level of quality available* to the auditor on train loading, and water trucks.

If this is World’s Best Practice, there is something wrong with our regulatory and monitoring system.

Upon public release of the Katestone Report, the Department of Planning’s Executive Director Resource Assessments & Compliance, [Dr Oliver Holm issued a statement saying:](#)

“the EPA and DP&E will review Whitehaven Coal’s progress on the implementation of the actions and will continue to monitor the control of dust at the mine.”

**However, in the Maules Creek area confidence in the Department of Planning and EPA is low, and for good reason.**

Air pollution complaints have been escalating. Complaints into dust pollution are not new for Whitehaven’s Tarrawonga and Maules Creek coal mines.

In May 2015 a Maules Creek local sent a folio of photos to the Department of Planning complaining of dust pollution observed while driving past the mines, including this one below picturing dust clouds billowing from Tarrawonga mine. “The Department told me they could not do anything about it and suggested that it could be fog,” she said. “The suggestion that this was fog was ridiculous. It didn’t look like fog, as the photos show”.



**DUST PICTURES AT TARRAWONGA  
27<sup>th</sup> May 2015**

In the minds of us here at [www.leardpollution.org](http://www.leardpollution.org) the Katestone Report should not lead to a conclusion of “generally” consistent with Best Practice. It seems far from it.

As serious dust events are occurring at Maules Creek and Tarrawonga mines since the release of the Katestone Report, it shows nothing short of a [Mandatory Dust Audit](#) will do, the NSW EPA must initiate this immediately.

Despite all the concerns about air pollution, Whitehaven plans to intensify mining in this region, expanding Maules Creek mine from 13 Million Tonnes per Annum to 15MTPA and operating an open cut pit under 300m from the banks of the Namoi River at the Vickery coal mine.

**Vickery coal mine expansion must not proceed.** There is **no evidence** that Whitehaven Coal is willing or capable of controlling dust pollution from its mines.

Welcome news has been received that the EPA has revised the Risk-Based licence of Maules Creek and Tarrawonga coal mines from LEVEL 2 to the highest LEVEL 3 in recognition of the failure of Whitehaven over a period of years to implement satisfactory management practices and its continuing threat to the community's health.

This alone is not a strong enough message to Whitehaven Coal.

The incidents discussed above were immediately reported to the EPA for investigation. At the time of publication, the public awaited the EPA's response.

#### **Tarrawonga Coal Mine – portion of breaches and non-compliances 2015 only**

##### Penalty Notices:

- Implementation of Flora and Fauna Management Plan - \$3000 – 21.8.15 - Failure to implement Flora and Fauna Management Plan including:
  - Failure to obtain Secretary's approval of the Biodiversity Management Plan;
  - Failure to conduct seasonal monitoring;
  - Failure to establish ecologists qualifications prior to clearing;
  - Failure to include details of flora clearing/fauna impact in AEMR;
  - Failure to implement irrigation system in pasture area;
  - Failure to implement bushfire management plan.

##### Warning Letter: Various matters post 2015 Biodiversity and Heritage Audit – 21.8.15

- Failure to seek approval of water management plan & plan did not meet requirement for riparian health and monitoring of GDEs or stygofauna;
- Failure to address requirement for long term rehabilitation/maintenance of threatened species
  - Failure to lodge conservation Bond;
  - Failure to implement heritage management plan;
  - No evidence of AEMR being distributed as per condition;
  - Late submission of 2014 Independent Environmental Audit report.